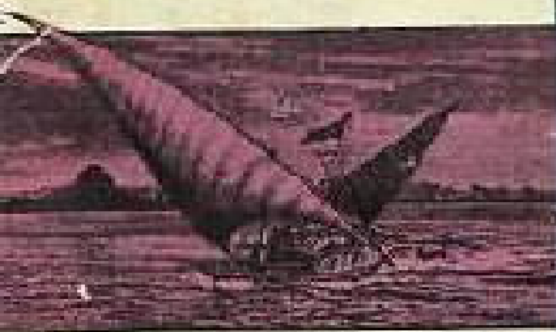




BIGGLES

**AND THE
DEEP BLUE SEA**

**Captain
W.E. JOHNS**



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CHAPTER 1 A TALK ABOUT ISLANDS

BIGGLES sat in his usual chair in the office of his chief, Air Commodore Raymond of the Special Air Section, Scotland Yard, and waited for him to speak. The Air Commodore looked at his senior operational pilot with a curious expression on his face. 'You've had quite a lot of experience of islands, Bigglesworth, haven't you,' he said. It was more a statement than a question.

'Too much,' Biggles answered. 'I've been trotting about islands of one sort or another for so long that I dream about them. But any romantic notions I may have had about so-called desert isles was knocked on the head long ago. With all respect to Robinson Crusoe they're not what they're cracked up to be. There are too many perishing islands.'

'Surely that depends on the island, where it is and the climate.'

'Maybe, sir. But as far as I'm concerned you can have the lot.' Biggles frowned suspicion. 'Don't say you've found another.'

'Well, more or less.'

Biggles shook his head sadly. 'That's what I was afraid of.'

'Some people like islands.'

'They can have 'em. I know there isn't an island left in the world that isn't claimed by somebody. There was a time when there were plenty of odd islands scattered over the globe which nobody wanted, but aviation put an end to all that. There was a general scramble for any lump of rock sticking out of the sea that might serve as a refuelling depot, a radio station or a meteorological establishment. I remember countries nearly went to war over some of them.'

'Being first in the field we got our share and stuck up a Union Jack to prove ownership,' the Air Commodore said, with a smile. 'Of course, the British Empire has shrunk considerably in our time, but we still

have a few islands dotted about the Seven Seas,' he added.

'So I believe,' answered Biggles. 'I hope someone has kept a record of them. ,

'No country is likely to forget a piece of property where its flag is flying.'

'Huh! Don't you believe it,' Biggles said cynically. 'What about Clipperton Island, or, as Mexico calls it, Isla de la Pasion. That's one everyone forgot. It ended in a nice mess'

The Air Commodore puckered his forehead. 'I can't recall it. What happened ?'

'It gives point to my argument that people *can* forget their property. Clipperton, so called after a pirate of that name, is a lump of rock in the Pacific 600 miles from the coast of South America, two miles in circumference and nowhere more than sixty feet high. When the grab was on it was claimed by both France and Mexico, and the case had been referred to the International Court at the Hague when the war came along. Would you be interested to know what happened ?'

'Very. Tell me.'

'It's a fascinating story, although not quite up to the generally accepted standards of a paradise island. Mexico jumped the gun by putting ashore, to keep their flag flying, a party of two officers and eleven soldiers. Some, including the senior officer, who may have read *Swiss Family Robinson* and imagined this was going to be a similar picnic, took their wives with them. As there was practically nothing edible on the island it was arranged for a supply ship to call once a month with a load of food. Unfortunately the government egg-head who dreamed up this slick operation, who must have been more hen-brained than most, overlooked making a note of it, with the result that the poor devils who had been put ashore were completely forgotten. Imagine the hours they must have spent watching for the ship that never came.'

'For how long ?'

'Three years. Then, by mere chance, an American ship happened to call. It found three women and some kids, skin and bones and rotten with scurvy, living like wild animals on any muck thrown up by the sea. One of the women survived. When no ship arrived, she said, and the men were so weak from hunger they could hardly stand, the senior officer and three men had set out in a leaky rowing-boat for the mainland, 600 miles away. They were never heard of again. Eventually the one man left alive on the island went raving mad, calling himself the king and making the women his slaves. One of the women brained him with an axe while he was asleep. Here you have

true-to-life desert island stuff. If that could happen in one place I see no reason why it shouldn't happen at another.'

'I see you're well-informed on the subject of islands,' the Air Commodore said, dryly.

'So well-informed that I wouldn't care if I never saw another.'

'I'm sorry you feel like that.'

'Ah! So that's it. What's the worry now?'

'I'm not worried. But the Colonial Office has asked us to check up on a little piece of British property. It hasn't exactly been forgotten, but it's some time since anyone had a look at it.'

'You 're talking about an island ?'

'Of course. We've been talking about islands.'

'Sounds a nice little job for the Navy.'

'There are reasons why it might be more advisable to send an aircraft. I'll tell you why presently.'

'To save me wasting your time, sir, by asking a lot of questions, suppose you do the talking and put me in the picture. How long is it since anyone stepped on this chunk of earth we've been asked to investigate ?'

'To the best of our knowledge — that is, from the official angle — twenty years.'

'Twenty —, Biggles stared. 'Suffering Icarus! Why, the island may not even be there now. Islands have been known to disappear, plenty of them. I could give you quite a long list if I had nothing else to do. Really, sir, you can't expect me to get wildly enthusiastic at the idea of looking for something that may not exist.'

'I don't think there's much fear of that.'

'I'd hope not. But if no one has looked in for twenty years it can't be much use.'

'It might be. That's what we'd like to know, and what we've been asked to find out.'

'This place must be pretty remote.'

'It is. Well off the track of ships.'

'Where is it, exactly ? Let me get my bearings.'

'Come over here.' The Air Commodore got up and crossed the room to a map of the world that covered most of one wall. Using his pen as a pointer he indicated a spot almost in the middle of the Bay of Bengal; or roughly half-way between the east coast of India and lower Burma. 'Here we are,' he said.

Biggles looked. 'I don't see anything.'

'If you'll look close you'll see a microscopic dot, like a fly-speck, with a little red line under it to show that it's British. It wouldn't be shown at all in the average atlas.'

'I suppose it has a name?'

'Yes. It's Jean Bonney Island.'

'You don't mean Bonny Jean?'

'No. Jean Bonney. Bonney for short.'

'Who was she?'

'It was the name of a ship, although I imagine the ship was named after a woman, possibly the owner's wife. As you probably know, in the great days of discovery, when new islands were being found every other day, names ran short and it became the custom for mariners to name their discoveries after themselves, their ship or their employers. The *Jean Bonney* was the name of a craft, an East Indiaman, commanded by a Scot named Grant. He came across the island in the early eighteenth century, having been blown off his course by a hurricane. He went ashore for water and staked his claim by painting his name, and the name of his ship, with the date, on a rock. I believe it's still there —or it was. Being far from any regular shipping lane, it couldn't have been visited more than once or twice in the next hundred years.'

'So there's nothing worth taking away?'

'We're not so sure about that —now.'

Biggles raised his eyebrows. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Come and sit down and I'll tell you what started this particular ball rolling.'

After they had returned to their seats the Air Commodore continued: 'First I'd better give you the gen about this island. It has one or two unusual features.'

'What is it — a coral atoll?'

'No. It's mostly volcanic rock. It's a little over a mile long, about three hundred yards wide, flat, tapering towards the end and lies low in the water. Not more than twenty feet high at the highest point; for which reason, Captain Grant says in his log, the watch didn't spot it until they were nearly on top of it. He makes a note that he thought it might be awash in a hurricane. It lies on a line north-east and south-west. Keep that in mind. It's important. There's a slightly curving beach on the weather side, but Grant found it impossible to land there on account of the heavy surf. That, it has since been ascertained, is how it is on ninety-nine days out of a hundred.'

'Then how did Grant get ashore?'

'Just a minute, I'm coming to that. On the opposite side of the island there's a coral reef enclosing the usual lagoon. The water there is calm, of course, but there's a snag. Grant couldn't find a break in the reef. In other words, there's no entrance to the lagoon. If there is he couldn't find it, and apparently he wasn't prepared to risk his ship trying to get in. On the outer side of the reef the water drops sheer for a hundred fathoms. There's nothing unusual in that. This enabled him to lie in close and have his crew carry one of the lifeboats over the reef to the lagoon. That's how he got ashore.'

'Why go to all that trouble?'

'He needed fresh water, a common state of affairs in the days of sail.'

'Did he find any?'

'Yes. In holes in the rocks. Presumably they fill up during the monsoon. Just now you asked me why the Navy couldn't be sent to make a survey of the island. It's a dangerous place for a ship. Of course, it could be done, but a vessel of any size would have to make a slow approach, taking soundings, and then, to put a party ashore, lower a boat. All this would take time, enough time for anyone on the island who didn't want to be seen to take cover and hide what he was doing.'

'Is there reason to suppose there is somebody there?'

'Let's say there could be.'

'Doing what?'

'That's what we'd like to know. But I haven't finished yet. The most interesting part of the story, from your angle, is yet to come. I've given you some facts about the island so that you'll be able to follow it clearly without asking questions.'

'I'm listening, sir.' Biggles lit a cigarette.

'Our interest in this out-of-the-way place started during the war when someone with imagination realized that Bonney might be useful for getting important people to the Burma campaign, by air, without the risk of being shot down on the way, as had happened more than once on the usual overland route. The Navy investigated and found that if some clearing was done it would be possible to make: a landing strip, a sort of half-way house between India and Lower Burma, far from any possible enemy air activity. The enemy wouldn't even suspect it. Get the idea?'

'It's good to know somebody used his head.'

'Well, the job was done. It was a risky operation, but in a war one has to take risks that would not be justified in peacetime. Emergency supplies were put ashore and some Nissen huts erected to

accommodate them and a small maintenance staff. A shuttle air service was laid on. So a use for Bonney was found after all, and quite a few VIPs went to the Far East via this almost forgotten little island. The enemy never discovered it. The war ended, the maintenance party was taken off and Jean Bonney Island resumed its unbroken solitude. But that isn't the end. Not quite. Did you ever meet an officer, a Squadron Leader by the name of Stonehouse?'

'I can't recall the name.'

'No matter. All you need know is, when he retired from the Service he went into the City and became a successful financier. When he had made all the money he needed he packed up to enjoy it. He loved the sea, for which reason no doubt the first war saw him in the Royal Naval Air Service. When he had made his fortune he went back to the sea — the easy way. He bought an expensive steam yacht and with a hand-picked crew started on a quiet cruise round the world.'

'Calling, I suppose, at Bonney Island.'

'That's where you're wrong. He didn't even know the island existed. His war flying had never taken him within a thousand miles of it. But last year he was running from Singapore to Calcutta when he saw a curious thing. At least, as a pilot and considering his position, it struck him as curious. He saw an aeroplane. He heard it first, then he spotted it. Quite a small machine, he thought, but it was too far off for him to recognize the type. He couldn't imagine what it was doing or where it could be going. He thought it so strange that he worked out its position and course; which he noted in his logbook. It was heading due east, apparently for nowhere. Not knowing of Bonney Island he reckoned the plane had about eight hundred miles of open water in front of it before it could make a landfall. He decided the pilot was either crazy or lost to the world.'

'Didn't he do anything about it?'

'What could he do? The machine was in sight for only a matter of minutes. He tried to contact it by radio but got no answer. He didn't attach any great importance to it, but when he was back in London he casually asked a friend at the Aero Club if he knew anything about the aircraft he had seen out in the blue. Now it happened that this friend had for a time during the war been working on the Bonney Island run, and he said, from its course, it looked as if that was where the unknown plane had been making for. Later, this friend, talking to someone at the Air Ministry, remarked that he'd heard the Bonney Island route had been reopened. The man said, if it had he knew nothing about it. Nor did he know anything about the plane. None had been reported missing in that area. To make a long story short, this rumour, by means that I needn't go into, reached the ears of

someone at the Colonial Office. That's what set the ball rolling. He wondered if someone was trying to jump our claim to Bonney Island.'

'And it was decided the time had come to have another look at it,' put in Biggles.

'Exactly. I've told you why it has been thought advisable to send an aircraft instead of a ship. Anyway, the Navy hadn't got a ship anywhere near the place. A plane would be less expensive, and faster.'

Biggles nodded. 'Yes, I see that.'

'But you're not happy about it.'

'Frankly, sir, no.'

The Air Commodore smiled. 'Lissie prefers warm water jobs.'

'So would I if there weren't so many sharks in it. The Bay of Bengal is stiff with 'em. Can you tell me anything more about this perishing island that's making a nuisance of itself'

'It lies at the right angle for landings, either for the north-west or south-east monsoon. That's what made a landing strip practicable.'

'I was thinking more about food. Could a man live there should he get stranded?'

'For a time, perhaps, but I'm afraid he'd get tired of coconuts and fish. There's nothing else, unless some of the seeds the maintenance party planted have flourished.'

'Is the water of the lagoon deep enough for a marine aircraft to land on without tearing a hole in its keel?'

'I don't think it has ever been properly surveyed.'

'I was thinking the landing strip might have become overgrown.'

'In that case you'd have to take a chance with the lagoon, I'm afraid.'

'*You're* afraid, sir! Not as afraid as I am.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Bigglesworth. You know as well as I do that when a pilot starts to be afraid of anything the time has come for him to hang up his cap and goggles. But don't let's talk about it. Any more difficulties to raise before you go ? You can usually think of some.'

'For which reason, so far; I've always managed to get back. I like to know what I might run up against before I start. I find it's better than bumping into something nasty unprepared.'

'All right. You needn't get sarcastic. What's on your mind?'

'Supposing this island is still there, and I manage to find it, and I find somebody on it, what do I do ?'

'Find out who the man is, his nationality, and what he's doing. That's all.'

'And if he won't talk?' 'Come home and report to me. Flying by dead reckoning; you should have no difficulty in finding Bonney. Pilots found it during the war. You should have ample endurance range with the *Gadfly*¹, the machine you used for that South American treasure ship job.² It would take you right across the Bay of Bengal if that became necessary. It may not even be vital that you should land. You would from a low altitude be able to see any signs of activity, should there be any. Take a camera. But it doesn't need me to tell you what to look for. There is this about it. You're not likely to encounter any anti-aircraft opposition. How soon can you be ready?'

¹ *Gadfly. An all metal high-wing cantilever monoplane amphibian flying boat with twin 1,000 h.p. engines installed in the wing. Accommodation for two pilots and six passengers. Endurance range 2,000 miles. Retractable landing gear and hydraulic wheel brakes for land work.*

² See *Biggles at World's End*

'I should be on my way inside a week. That would give me time to check the *Gadfly*, give it a trial run and lay aboard some stores, to keep the wolf at bay while I'm there. Even if I see nothing on the island, I'd probably land on the lagoon for a rest. Long distance over-water flying is always a bit of a strain, knowing what would happen if one was ditched without a chance of seeing a ship. I only hope the coral hasn't grown up from the bottom of the lagoon, or heavy seas thrown in chunks of the reef. That *can* happen. With a metal hull one snag could sink me. That's why I still think this should be a job for the lads in navy blue.'

'I'm inclined to agree, but I've told you why it has been decided to send an aircraft, anyhow in the first place. Don't look so glum about it. After all, you never know what you may find on an abandoned desert island.'

'That's just it, you don't,' returned Biggles grimly.

The Air Commodore smiled. 'It might be something worth having.'

'If I know anything it's more likely to be something I could well do without, so I can only hope you're right.'

'Who win you take with you? I don't care who goes as long as someone is left here to take care of things while you're away.'

'I'll think about that, sir. I may let my chaps decide that for themselves. Or if they want to go they can toss a coin for it.' Biggles got up. 'Now I'd better see about getting ready.' He left the room and returned to his office to be met by the questioning eyes of his three police pilots.

'What's the drill this time?' inquired Ginger. 'Anything exciting?'

'Could be. Might be simple routine,' answered Biggles, sitting on a

corner of his desk. 'Depends on what you'd call exciting. In a nutshell it's this. In the Indian ocean, or to be more precise the Bay of Bengal part of it, there is alleged to be an island, British owned, by the name of Jean Bonney, which has not been officially inspected for years and years. I've been ordered to have a dekko at it. That's all.'

'And why this sudden passion for dear Jean?' asked Bertie.

'An ex-RAF officer, apparently beloved by the gods since he's now a millionaire, cruising in his yacht in the Bay of Bengal, sighted an unidentified aircraft beetling eastward along fifteen degrees of latitude, a course which, whether the pilot knew it or not, would have taken it over, or close to, Jean Bonney. He signalled but got no reply.'

'So this is really a rescue job?' put in Algy.

'Not exactly, although it might turn out to be that. But I fancy the chief intention is no more than a snoop round to make sure somebody isn't trying to pinch one of the few remaining bits and pieces of British Empire. I'm going as soon as the *Gadfly* can be got ready. Who wants to come ? Don't all holler at once.'

Three hands were raised. 'That's what I thought,' Biggles said. 'You can't all come. I shall only take a partner.'

'Why only one?' Ginger wanted to know, looking surprised.

'Two reasons. First, there would be no point in carrying unnecessary cargo on a long over-water haul. The Air Commodore insists on someone being left in charge here, anyway. Secondly, I shall feel more comfortable knowing there's a reserve machine standing by to collect me should I find myself playing Crusoe on this lump of rock. If you all want to come you can settle it between yourselves; or to save any argument perhaps it would be better to draw lots for it.'

Biggles tore three strips of paper from his scribbling pad. On one he wrote 'go'. The other two he left blank. He put them face down on the desk. 'Help yourselves,' he invited.

Ginger drew first. It was blank. 'No luck,' he muttered disgustedly.

Bertie drew next. He shrugged. 'No bananas for me.' Biggles looked at Algy. 'Looks like you and me, chum,' he said. 'Sit down and I'll give you the rest of the gen. Then we'll see about getting organized.'

CHAPTER 2

THE LONELY ISLE

FROM horizon to horizon the sky was blue; an immutable canopy of purest lapis lazuli. Across it the sun toiled its age-old course,

hurling down heat with silent force. The sea was blue; the implacable ultramarine blue of unfathomable depths. Between the two a man-made intruder called an aeroplane droned a passage as deliberate as that of a migrating bird. In the control cabin were two men, Biggles and his life-long friend and partner, Air Police Sergeant Algy Lacey. They were dressed alike in plain khaki drill suits. Both wore tropical helmets as a protection against the sun, which near the Equator can be as tiresome in an aircraft as on the ground.

For some time neither had spoken. They had been operating the plane for a week, resting only at night, outward bound for a comparatively microscopic piece of land in a world of water; so there may not have been much left to say. They had seen no dry ground since their last port of call, Dum Dum, the aerodrome for Calcutta, in India. On the few occasions when Biggles spoke it was to ask a question; always the same question.

'See anything?' And so far the answer had always been the same.

'Not a thing.'

With his eyes alternating between the instrument panel and the unbroken sweep of horizon ahead Biggles asked the question again now.

'Not a thing,' Algy answered monotonously. But this time with just a trace of anxiety, he added: 'Bonney should be coming up —if it's still in the same place.'

'It'll be in the same place, no doubt — If it's still anywhere,' replied Biggles. 'I don't trust these little remote islands. Like ships they have been known to disappear, without trace —as the saying is. More than one skipper has found himself sailing over what should be an island, with no land in sight for fifty miles around.'

'The position of the island having been incorrectly plotted in the first place, I suppose,' surmised Algy

'Not necessarily. Volcanic action or the shifting of the level of the ocean floor can do it. Dougherty Island, in the South Pacific, for instance; a fair-sized chunk of land eight miles long and eighty feet high with a big population of seals and birds. It was plotted, and sometimes visited, by several ships, but later all attempts to find it failed. Finally it had to be struck off the charts. The same thing has happened to other islands.'

'Let's hope that hasn't happened to Jean Bonney.'

'It might. It wouldn't worry me overmuch if it did. Probably the best thing that could happen for all the use it is. But it's too soon to talk about that. Keep your eyes open. It can't be far away. There isn't much of it and what there is lies low on the water.'

The conversation lapsed, but within minutes Algy had sat bolt upright, staring at something in the distance.

'What is it ?' asked Biggles.

'Breakers —I think. Either that or a school of whales.'

'Where?'

'Forty-five degrees over the port bow. Forty miles for a rough guess, although in this sort of visibility it might be more.'

Biggles eased the nose of the *Gadfly* round to that direction. A pause. Then he said: 'I think you 're right. Unless we've discovered a new island, which isn't very likely, it can only be Bonney. According to the chart there's nothing else within two hundred miles. So it seems it's still above water. When we get nearer watch for smoke. If there's anyone there, as soon as he hears us, or spots us, he'll light the bonfire he should have ready. That, I gather, is the usual procedure with castaways.'

'You're assuming if anyone is there he'll be a castaway?'

'I can't imagine anyone living on Bonney from choice. Quite a few people have tried this get-away-from-it-all lark, but they soon get pretty bored with it.'

'No one in his right mind would deliberately put himself out of reach of a doctor or a dentist,' said Algy. 'What can you do by yourself with an aching tooth ?'

'One fellow who tried it, I remember, a German doctor, tried to get over that difficulty by having all his teeth out and replacing them with stainless steel dentures.'

Algy grinned. 'That must have looked enchanting. What happened to him '

'Nobody knows. When somebody called to see him he wasn't there. Maybe he accidentally swallowed his teeth and bit himself to death. See any smoke ?'

'No.'

'Then it's unlikely we shall find anyone there. If there is someone he must have heard us by now.'

The aircraft was now close enough to the island for details to be seen distinctly. It lay just as it had been described, the great ocean rollers pounding the exposed side with the regularity of a pendulum, and, on the other, the enclosed lagoon, as tranquil as the proverbial millpond, its shallow depth revealed by the different colours of the water inside the reef. In one place only, at the most seaward point, was there a slight ripple. The island itself was mostly verdant, but there was a fair amount of rock and sand. A group of coconut palms at

one end, probably sprung from nuts thrown ashore by the waves, tossed their green fronds into the air.

'Well, there it is,' Biggles said. 'I suppose one might call that a good example of the traditional desert island if there is such a thing.'

'Looks pretty from up here,' returned Algy. 'Not much in the way of scenery. I can see one or two Nissen huts still standing. What's the drill now?' he added, as with engines retarded the machine began to lose height.

'Just the job for anyone wanting to lead a quiet life; but I don't think we shall find anyone here,' murmured Biggles. 'For a start we'll fly round low to see, among other things, what the old airstrip looks like after an this time. Then, if there's nothing doing, and should the weather look like holding fine, we might sit on the lagoon for a while for a breather and a cigarette. With a good anchorage we might even have a swim and stay the night to see what life is like away from the din of traffic and the stink of petrol fumes. We —'

'Hi! Hold it. Did you see that?' broke in Algy.

'See what?'

'That man. There is a man down there, after all.'

Biggles frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'Certain. Well, almost certain. I saw a man bolt into one of the huts, bending low as if he was trying to get out of sight.'

'Extraordinary!'

'If it wasn't a man it was mighty like one. I suppose it could have been a monkey, a big one.'

'We're not likely to find monkeys here, large or small, unless, of course, one escaped from a ship. Watch the hut.'

'Okay. I'm certain I saw a movement. No mistake about that.'

'If there is a man why should he bolt? I'd have expected him to run into the open and signify joy by doing a war-dance.'

'I wouldn't know the answer to that. I'm only telling you what I saw.'

'We'll go down. Then we shall know.'

Biggles took the *Gadfly* down to something in the order of a hundred feet, and then, having flown round the coastline, glided over the lagoon.

'It looks clear enough,' he observed, a trifle dubiously. 'One can't always be sure. I'd bet that water is as transparent as gin. One can see the bottom from here, but that doesn't mean there isn't a snag a few inches under the surface. We shall have to chance it. But before we do, let's have another look at the airstrip.'

There was no difficulty in finding it because the only possible straight run of sufficient length was down what might be described as the backbone of the island; that is, the middle.

'It looks a bit rough, but at all events it's still there,' observed Biggles. 'Actually, not as rough as I'd expect it to be after so long without being used. No signs of a crashed aircraft, so it begins to look as if the one that started this nonsense didn't end up here after all. I prefer to use the lagoon. We'll go down and stretch our legs. Afterwards we might have a dip to get some of the sweat off our hides.'

He made another slow run across the lagoon looking down at the translucent water. The bottom, a multicoloured picture of coral, rock and sand, could be seen in wonderful detail, but as far as could be ascertained nothing broke the surface. Satisfied, he made a final run, and then with engines idling allowed the keel lightly to kiss the glassy surface and run on to cut a spreading V-shaped ripple before coming quietly to rest. An audience of gulls on the reef watched the performance but did not move.

'Well, we're down, anyway,' Biggles said, surveying the scene around the shore line of the island in particular. It was mostly a jumble of rocks and boulders, although there were one or two small beaches of white coral sand.

'I think we'll stay on the water,' he decided. 'It would be easier to get off if the weather changed and we had to move in a hurry. We'll tie up to that rock over there; it looks ready-made for a mooring. You keep a look-out for anyone moving while I take her in. I must own I'm a bit puzzled by that movement you saw; but I can't believe there's anyone here. If there was, surely he'd be on his way to us by now. I would have thought he wouldn't be able to get to us fast enough.'

With Algy watching the island Biggles took the aircraft close to the rock he had mentioned and made fast, so that the machine floated lightly on water so clear, so transparent, that it might have been air. He switched off the engines and stepped ashore.

'See anything ?' he asked Algy , who joined him.

'Nothing. Beats me. I could have sworn I saw someone.'

'We should soon be able to settle that beyond all doubt,' declared Biggles. 'I'm going to have a cigarette before I do anything else.'

He lit one and drew on it with evident satisfaction. The only sound was the confused booming of the breakers on the opposite side of the island.

'Nice place for someone to start a holiday camp,' remarked Algy.

Biggles did not answer. His eyes were focused on a spot on the long

irregular sweep of reef.

'What are you looking at ?' inquired Algy , happening to glance at him.

'That ripple by the far perimeter of the reef. According to my information, or the information given to the Air Commodore, the Navy couldn't do this job because it was impossible for a ship to get into the lagoon as there was no opening in the reef; and on most days heavy seas on the other side of the island make a landing there dangerous. If I can't see a break in the reef there must be something wrong with my eyes. Otherwise, how comes that ripple? Surely that could only be caused by the swell outside surging in.'

'I see what you mean,' rejoined Algy. 'We're in, so what does it matter?'

'I don't suppose it matters much, but it struck me as odd. Someone must have made a mistake or else the reef has broken down recently. We ought to check that before we leave because if there is an entrance into the lagoon, the Admiralty should know about it so that their Sailing Directions can be corrected. It would make the island a different proposition altogether. If we have a swim I'll have a closer look at that. But I think the first thing we'd better do is take a walk round.'

So saying, having finished his cigarette, Biggles got up and they walked together up the slight incline towards the middle of the island, the site of the wartime landing strip.

There was no difficulty in finding it. At the top of the rise the long piece of open ground lay before them.

'It's in a better condition than I would have supposed after twenty-odd years,' remarked Biggles. 'In this part of the world vegetation grows quickly, and soon covers any available space.'

He looked at the Nissen huts, situated at the extreme end of the runway.

You must have been mistaken when you thought you saw someone,' he went on. 'If there is a Crusoe living here he must be blind and deaf, or he would have seen us.'

After they had walked on a little way he stopped again, looking at something near his feet.

'Hello, what's this ?' He pointed to the stump of what had obviously been a young palm tree. 'If no one has been here since the war how did this happen? That tree wasn't blown down. Look for yourself. It was cut with a sharp axe, and not long ago. It's a clean cut, and it's still comparatively fresh. Anyway, that wasn't done twenty years ago. And I'll tell you something else. Unless there has been a gale the man

who trimmed the tree must have dragged it away. There it is, lying over there, clear of the runway, you'll notice. See what I'm getting at ?'

'Yes, I see what you mean,' Algy answered slowly. 'The strip has been used recently.'

'I don't know about that, but someone has certainly been busy here since the place was last used officially. Look at the runway. It's clear. Clear of anything like an obstruction. I'm getting a feeling that something has been going on here.'

Algy looked puzzled. 'I don't get it. If someone came here in a boat, where's the boat ? And why come here? If the plane that was seen heading this way came here, where's the plane? It isn't here or we'd see it, whole or in pieces. You couldn't hide an aircraft on an almost bare piece of ground this size.'

Biggles thought for a moment, subconsciously lighting another cigarette. He looked at Algy with a smile of amusement. 'It looks as if there could be a pretty little mystery to solve here if we felt like spending time on it. It shouldn't be too difficult to find out who came here. He wouldn't sleep in the open when he could put a roof over his head. If he used one of the Nissen huts he must surely have left traces; a clue or two for us to work on. Not that it's important. I can't see what harm anyone could do here. Let's have a look at the huts. We needn't spend much time on it.'

'What's the hurry ?'

'No hurry —at present. But in this part of the world there can occur a nasty thing called a hurricane, a cyclone, typhoon — call it what you like. I'd hate to be caught here in one. Nor need we wonder what the plane would look like when the wind and waves had finished with it.'

'I'd make a small bet that the bloke who obviously has kept the runway clear is still here,' stated Algy as they walked on towards the huts. 'I don't imagine things.'

'Then all I can say, pal, is this. If you're right he's up to no good. Otherwise why should he hide himself? Honest men don't run away from visitors, certainly in a place like this.'

'I must say it'd be queer behaviour for a genuine castaway,' admitted Algy.

'I didn't say he was a genuine castaway. If there is anyone here he came here of his own free will, knowing where he was coming, and why.'

Nothing more was said. They walked on, their eyes on the huts still some distance in front of them. They stayed on the runway as the easiest way to reach the weather-stained semi-circular corrugated

iron structures. They remarked on more places where clearly an effort had been made to keep the strip free from obstructions. There was still no sign of anyone. The only things that moved were an occasional gull and the gently swaying fronds of the distant palms. The only sound was the wash of the breakers on the beach, like the confused murmur of traffic on a main road. All around lay the ocean, calm, blue, indifferent to the affairs of men.

They reached the nearest of the huts. The door was wide open, they looked inside. It was empty except for a quantity of refuse. They went on to the next. Again the door was open, propped open with a lump of coral. They glanced in. They stopped. They stared. Just inside, seated on a camp stool, was a man. He did not move except to glance up from something he was doing with a large, rather beautiful sea shell.

'Can I help you?' he said quietly, casually, in an educated voice.

After a pause to recover from his breath-taking astonishment Biggles answered, just as politely: 'No, thank you. We thought we might be able to help you.'

'I'm much obliged, but I'm not in need of assistance.' was the reply, given rather curtly. The man continued his occupation with the shell.

Biggles looked at Algy. Algy, eyes saucering, looked at Biggles. What more was there to say, since the man had made it abundantly clear that he was not inclined for conversation ?

Biggles touched Algy on the arm as a signal for them to move away.

CHAPTER 3

CLARENCE COLLINGWOOD CRUSOE

ALGY had made a comprehensive inspection of the man before moving away. He judged his age to be in the late thirties or early forties. He was clean-shaven with finely drawn features, a face that might have been described as artistic, or intellectual, an impression enhanced by large horn-rimmed spectacles. His hair was black, rather long and brushed well back, although that did not prevent a loose piece from drooping over a high forehead. It was evident from his well-modulated voice that he was a man of education and refinement.

If there was anything surprising about him it was his clothes, which were out of keeping with the rest of his appearance ; the more so considering where he was, where a pair of shorts or even a swimsuit would have been sufficient protection. They comprised a woollen shirt

under indescribably dirty denims, and, on his feet, heavy leather boots. So while his face and hands were those of a man of culture, even refinement, his attire was that of a navvy.

'Now what about it?' inquired Algy, with a note of triumph in his voice, when they had walked a little way. 'Was I right or was I right ? I was sure there was someone here.'

'Okay — okay, so you were right,' retorted Biggles. 'There's no need to make a song about it.'

They halted by what apparently was an attempt to make a small vegetable patch, not a very successful one judging by the quality of the produce — salads, tomatoes and the like.

'What do you make of him ?' asked Algy.

'My first impression is that we've either struck a nut case or a slick phoney. He's a bit too smug, too suave, to be what he'd like us to think he is. But he's not fooling me. I catch a fishy smell about this set-up, and before I leave I'm going to find out what's causing it. He's living here.. there's no doubt about that. There's a modern cook-stove in that hut he's using, and I noticed a bed at the far end. I'd say he's been here some little time. These vegetables he's trying to grow are proof of that. They also suggest he intends to stay. I may be quite wrong about him, but of one thing at least I am certain, apart from the obvious fact that he doesn't want us here. He's no genuine castaway. At least, no shipwrecked mariner I ever heard of walked up the beach out of the sea humping a bed and a metal stove.'

'Did you notice the mess his clothes were in ? All those dirty streaks as if he had been digging ? Why wear clothes at all in a place like this ?' 'I'd say for protection.'

'From what ?'

'I wouldn't know.'

'What are we going to do —push off and leave him to It?'

'Not on your life.'

'He's hoping that by giving us the cold shoulder we'll go.'

'That's what makes me suspicious there's more here than meets the eye — rock, sand, coral and a few windblown palms.'

'So what do we do? You're the boss.'

'I'll tell you when I've thought about it. If our uncivil friend in the hut fancies playing R. Crusoe Esquire, fair enough, that's all right with me; but that doesn't excuse him for not offering hospitality to guests, even uninvited ones, as common courtesy requires. The fact that he has failed to do so makes it plain that, as you say, he doesn't want us here. Why not ?'

'You tell me.'

'Because there's something here he'd rather we knew nothing about. There can't be any other reason.'

'Could he be pearling, having discovered an untouched bed of oysters in the lagoon ?'

'You don't need denims to dive for oysters. No, it isn't pearls. If it was we'd have seen oyster shells where the fish had been chucked in the sun to rot out. That's the usual practice of handling a quantity. I can't see him sitting opening oysters one at a time with a knife. Besides, we'd smell 'em. Rotting oysters stink to high heaven. That's not the answer. I'm going to find out what it is, though.'

'How?'

'By asking him a few straight questions. He's not going to brush me off as if the island was his own private property.'

'What if he refuses to answer them ?'

'It will prove he has something to hide. There's no need for an honest man to conceal anything.'

'He's doing something with a shell now.'

'It isn't an oyster shell, if that's what you still have in mind. Let's go back and have another word with him.'

'Just a jiffy. Let's have a look in this next hut. If I'm not mistaken it's the one I saw him come out of as we arrived.'

They walked the few yards to the next hut. The door was shut, but not fastened. Algy pushed it open wide to let in the daylight.

At first glance it appeared to be empty, or contain nothing more interesting than a heap of dry palm frond spines that might have been a supply of firewood. Algy would have turned away, but Biggles went in and began to dismantle the pile. He hadn't far to go to reveal what lay underneath. First he pulled out a spade, then a pointed iron crowbar. Looking up at Algy with a whimsical smile he said: 'You never know what you might find until you look. Unless I've been misled all my life you don't find implements of this sort lying about on lonely desert islands. Nor do you normally find 'em on board ship. It would need more imagination than I've got to visualize a castaway coming ashore with a load of ironmongery under his arm. And you don't want this sort of tackle to open any oyster that I've ever met.'

'He must have hidden these things in a hurry when he saw us coming,' conjectured Algy. 'That was when I spotted him.'

'I'd say that's a reasonable guess,' agreed Biggles. 'Why hide them ?'

'Because he didn't want us to see 'em.'

'Right again. Why didn't he want us to see 'em ?'

Algy shook his head. 'You'll have to answer that one yourself.'

'Very well. They might have led to awkward questions, that's why.'

On the way out he stooped to pick up something from the floor. 'Hello! What's this ?' It looked like a piece of dry mud, dark greyish in colour.

'Is there anything remarkable about it?' inquired Algy. 'To me it looks like a very ordinary lump of dirt.'

'It wouldn't be remarkable if there was more of it instead of just the one piece. The floor's plain sand. There's nothing outside except sand. How, then, did this get here ? It didn't come under its own steam. I'll tell you how it got here. It was brought. By whom? As there's only one man here, we can guess it in one. *Why* it was brought I don't know, but I may be able to work that out when I've had a closer look at it. For the moment it can wait. It's only a little thing and may mean nothing; but as a wiser man than me once said, in life it's often the little things that count. Now let's have another word with the sole population of Jean Bonney Island.'

They returned to the first hut. The man was still sitting there, doing something, or making a pretence of doing something, with the shell. He hardly troubled to look up when they reappeared in the doorway, but he said, with biting sarcasm: 'Well, have you finished your snooping?'

'Far from it,' returned Biggles smoothly. 'I've only just started. What are you doing with that shell ?'

'It isn't a shell. It's a fossil. I happen to be a biologist.' 'I see. You don't mind if I ask you one or two questions?'

'I do mind. I object strongly to this intrusion, even more to an unwarranted interrogation. Run away. You can see I'm busy.'

'You won't mind telling me your name ?'

'Why do you want to know ?'

'Call it curiosity.'

'You can go to the devil.'

'You seem to be a very churlish fellow,' accused Biggles. 'Have you some reason for withholding your name? In the circumstances it's a perfectly natural question, you must agree.'

'If it will make you any happier to know it, it's Clarence Collingwood.'

'Thank you. Why have you come here?'

'I happen to like it. Isn't that a good enough reason?'

'How did you get here ?'

Collingwood frowned. 'I've told you I object to being questioned. I don't know who you are or where you're going, so will you please press on and mind your own business?'

'This happens to be my business.'

This caused the man to look up sharply. 'And just what is your business?'

'This island, in case you don't know, is British. Word has reached London that some unauthorized person may be here and I've been sent out to investigate.'

'Oh! So that's it. What busybody started that rumour?'

'Apparently it wasn't a rumour. An aircraft was seen on course for the island and it was thought the pilot might be marooned here. Had that been the case I would have taken him off.'

'I have no wish to be taken off.'

'So I gather. Look, Mr Collingwood. I've put my cards on the table, why don't you show yours?'

'I have nothing more to say. If I am content to stay here it need concern no one else. When I came here the island was uninhabited and likely to remain so. How long are you going to stay here?'

'Till I've found out what you're doing.'

'I see,' Collingwood said coldly.

'Did you know when you came here that the island was uninhabited?' pressed Biggles.

Collingwood hesitated. 'I thought it might be.'

'You mean you hoped it would be.'

'Put it that way if you like.'

'You'd been here before, then?'

No answer.

'Would I be right in saying you're an aeroplane pilot?'

'I was.'

'During the war?'

'How did you guess?'

'Just now you used an expression that started in the RAF. You told me to press on.'

'Clever, aren't you?' sneered Collingwood. 'Very well. I flew here during the war. I liked the place, and when it was demobilized I decided to live here. Now trot along and pester someone else with your damned questions.'

'Just one more,' Biggles said quietly. He felt in his pocket and

produced the lump of mud. 'What's this ?'

'I think it's phosphate.'

'Is it useful for anything?'

'I believe it's sometimes incorporated in fertilizers.'

'Is that why you wanted it?'

'I thought a little might improve the quality of the soil in my little garden. All the ground here, what little there is, is impoverished. I happen to be a vegetarian. That's all I'm going to say. Now leave me alone before I lose my patience with you.'

'Okay, if that's how you want it,' replied Biggles calmly. 'But don't get the idea you've seen the last of me.'

'So you're going to stay here ?'

'For a little while, maybe.'

'On the lagoon ?'

'Probably.'

'Good. Then I wish you joy,' Collingwood said with a faint smile.

Biggles nudged Algy. 'Come on.' He turned and walked away.

Algy overtook him. 'Now what do you make of him ?' he asked in a puzzled voice.

'I don't know what to think, and that's a fact,' admitted Biggles. 'He may be one of these cranks one sometimes meets, in which case there may be some truth in what he says.'

'Could he be telling the truth ?'

'Some of it, perhaps; but I suspect not all of it. It doesn't fit like it should.'

'Where are we going now?'

'Back to the lagoon. We've done enough for one day. I need time to think. Moreover, I'm getting an empty feeling inside.'

'Then we're going to stay here?'

'Tonight, anyway. Maybe for a day or two. We'll see how things go. Tomorrow we'll take a walk round. I shall be interested to see where that lump of phosphate came from.'

'Do you believe it is phosphate?'

'Could be. I'm no expert. I'd have taken it for a piece of rough sandstone with a little silica in it. Not the sort of thing one would expect to find here, but I suppose it could happen.'

'If it was sandstone it would be no use as a fertilizer.'

'No use at all..'

'Then he might have been lying.'

'His explanation of why he wanted it didn't sound very convincing to me. He's been here before, so he must have known what conditions were like. He brought a spade and a crowbar. He must have brought some packets of seeds, which suggests he knew he was going to be here for some time. Why not bring some fertilizer? Of course, he may have known there was some here.'

'You don't need a crowbar to dig a garden, except possibly to shift rocks,' stated Aigy.

'That thought struck me. Why hide the tools, anyway? He didn't want us to see them.' Biggles shook his head. 'No, there's something here that doesn't add up. Considering Collingwood had to think fast, for the last thing he could have expected was visitors, he had a plausible tale ready by the time we got to him; but not quite plausible enough.'

They had reached the top of the little rise that looked down on the lagoon. A slab of rock had been stood on end in the manner of a tombstone. For which reason Biggles gave it a second glance in passing. Seeing an inscription on it he stopped. On it had been roughly painted, in letters that had faded but were still just discernible: *Jean Bonney. John Grant. Master. October 21, 1821.* 'So this is where our worthy Scots mariner, long since gathered to his fathers, staked his claim,' soliloquized Biggles, and passed on.

CHAPTER 4

NIGHT ALARM

THEY found the aircraft just as they had left it.

'I think it would be advisable to find a safer mooring, as we're going to stay here for a little while,' Biggles said. 'We might run her up on one of those little sandy beaches and peg her down. On the water a stiff breeze might cause her to swing and buckle a wing tip.'

Algy agreed. 'You know, I keep thinking of that last remark Collingwood made. You said we'd stay on the lagoon. He said he wished us joy.'

'What about it?'

'I didn't like the way he said it. Anyhow, why should he wish us joy?'

Biggles shrugged. 'Just being sarcastic, I suppose. If you'll brew up we'll have a mug of tea. You might open some cans of lovely grub at the same time.' He took the piece of alleged phosphate from his

pocket, put it on the rock and began throwing off his clothes.

'Why, what are you going to do ?'

'Have a quick dip. Then I shall walk along the reef to see if that surge of water is really an entrance.' Biggles continued undressing until he stood only in his short underpants. He did not take off his light canvas shoes.

'Just a minute,' said Algy sharply. 'Did you see that?'

See what ?'

'There was a heck of a big swirl over there. You can still see the ripples.' He pointed. 'It might be a shark.'

'Unless there's a passage through the reef a shark couldn't get into the lagoon. If there was one inside we'd see his dorsal fin. A shark usually advertises his presence. More likely it was a shoal of small fish near the surface.' So saying he took a header into the tepid water.

Algy watched for a few seconds and then went on board to prepare a meal.

After a few strokes Biggles came out of the water, shook himself, walked to the place where the reef joined the mainland and set off along it for the point of interest; a matter of perhaps a hundred yards. The exposed surface of the coral was rough and uneven, as he knew it would be, for which reason he had kept his shoes on, aware that living coral, cutting the skin, can be poisonous and make a wound not easy to heal. After going some way he went to the extreme outside edge of the reef and looked down, only to step back quickly with a twinge of vertigo when he perceived that the sailor who had discovered the island had been right about the depth of water there. It was like looking over the edge of a sheer cliff, with this difference: here there was no visible bottom. It was like looking into space. In the crystal atmosphere the water might not have been there. First there was pale blue light; but it became darker, darker, darker, to merge into deepest indigo. Then nothingness.

He went on to where there was a surge of water into the lagoon and saw at once that he had been right in his conjecture. There was a definite break in the reef, not very wide, but wide enough to permit the passage of a ship of fair size. Why hadn't Captain Grant discovered it? It would have saved him the trouble of manhandling a lifeboat over the coral. Biggles examined the gap carefully, going down on his hands and knees to peer into the depths. He marked the jagged sides, and loose boulders of coral lying about on the bottom of the shallow lagoon. Satisfied with his inspection he returned to the island by the way he had come to find Algy had laid a picnic lunch ashore on the rock.

'There's a break in the reef,' he said, as he seated himself.

'Is there, by jove? How wide?'

'Wide enough to let a ship of fair size get into the lagoon.'

'Strange that nobody seems to have spotted it.'

'It wasn't always there. It isn't a natural break. It was blasted. I could see the bore holes where the explosive charges had been put in. Pieces of broken coral lay scattered about on the floor of the lagoon.'

Algy stared. 'How extraordinary. Who on earth would do that?'

Biggles raised a shoulder. 'Obviously somebody who had ideas of using the lagoon.'

'Could it have been done when the island was in use during the war?'

'I don't think so. It looks too recent for that.'

'Collingwood?'

'Possibly. We've no means of knowing. But it goes some way to confirm my opinion that something's going on here —or has been going on.'

'What can we do about it?'

'Not much at the moment. It's too late to do anything today, anyhow, but tomorrow I'm going to have a closer look at the island to find what makes it worth while to bring a boat here. The weather seems set fair, so the machine can stay where it is for the time being. I shall sleep ashore. It'll be less cramped than in the cabin.' Biggles helped himself to the food that had been set out.

'Collingwood must know what's going on,' declared Algy.

'Of course he knows. He *must* know. I'd say he's a party to whatever is going on here. That would account for him being so offhand with us. He doesn't want us here, but he has a lot more interest in us than he pretends. From out on the reef I could see him at the door of his hut watching me.'

'Then he must have seen you find the gap in the reef.'

'Of course. And if he's as shrewd as I fancy he is he'll realize I know the entrance to the lagoon was dynamited. Still, I don't see how he can do anything about it.'

'He must be worried by the thought of us going back to London to report what we've found.'

'Let him worry.'

'He might try to stop us.'

'I can't see him going as far as that.'

They sat talking over their meal, and afterwards drinking tea, while

the sun sank into the ocean and a trance-like calm settled over the lonely little island. The breeze died. The fronds of the coconut palms came to rest. The gulls retired to their roosts. Only the ocean rollers! still waged their everlasting war against the land. After a brief but deepening afterglow the day died and the curtain of night was drawn. But not for long. A full moon, huge, white and shining like burnished metal, soared into view, to throw a trail of gleaming quicksilver on the gently heaving waters beyond the reef. A million stars sparkled like diamonds in the sky.

For a time Biggles and Algy sat in silence, entranced by the strange beauty of the scene. Then taking the cigarette from his lips, Biggles said: 'This is the sort of picture that sends poets reaching for their pens. You know, Algy old boy, looking at this I'm not sure Collingwood hasn't got something in settling here. Some people would give their ears to be where we're sitting now. Peace and quiet is what half the world is looking for, but it gets harder and harder to find. If Collingwood hadn't been so snooty with us I'd be tempted to fly straight home and say there was nothing here to report.'

'If you feel like that why not do it?'

'Because when a man is rude to me some streak of cussedness makes me look for something to cause him to regret it.' Biggles got up. 'I'm going to fetch one of the seat cushions for a pillow and doss down on this patch of sand.'

This he did. Having made himself comfortable, his last words were: 'If you're awake and see any signs of a change in the weather let me know at once.'

'Okay, chaps. Sure you wouldn't like me to stay awake to keep guard?'

'I don't think there's any need for that,' Biggles answered, and in a few minutes his steady breathing announced that he was asleep.

Algy settled down to follow suit, but found, as many people accustomed to having a roof over their heads have discovered, that a canopy of a full moon and stars can in some strange way be disturbing; and although he courted sleep with all the methods he knew, it eluded him. Eventually, with his brain running tirelessly over the events of the day, he realized he had reached the stage when he was becoming more wide awake. In this condition there is only one thing to be done. Make a break. He sat up.

Sitting there with his chin in his hands, presently he noticed something he could not understand. He tried to ignore it, but he found his eyes returning to it over and over again. It was a pinpoint of light on the rock close to him. At first he thought it might be a luminous insect, a firefly, a glow-worm, or something of that nature. But it

never moved. Finally his curiosity got the better of him and he made the effort to rise to find out what it was. With the tiny light constant he was able to walk straight to it.

To his surprise he found it was the piece of hard mud, or stone, which Biggles had put there. The object which Collingwood had said was phosphate. Not all of it glowed. Merely a tiny vein of something that ran through it. He examined it curiously. Was it moonlight reflected by certain particles? He turned the stone away from the light. If anything it glowed more brightly. Leaving the thing as it lay, but making a mental note to tell Biggles about it in the morning, he returned to his position on the sand.

Before settling down in another attempt to get some sleep he had a last look across the lagoon, marvelling at the unearthly quality of the scene. As he did this he saw another strange thing. At least he thought it strange; indeed, so strange as to be impossible. A piece, a small portion of the reef, had moved. Had it *really* moved? He watched. Imagination? A trick of the moonlight? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. This time there was no mistake. Something on the reef was moving; a slow but definite movement. He stood up. Then he understood. It was not the coral that was moving, but something on it; a dark bulky object which, with a curious rolling motion, was coming nearer to the island. There was something horribly sinister about the silent, deliberate approach. He observed that if it continued it would arrive near him, and the aircraft, floating on the water like a sleeping duck.

He watched for another minute, but as the thing came on he touched Biggles on the arm.

Biggles raised himself on an elbow. 'What's the trouble?'

'There's something I think you should see.' Algy pointed. 'There it is, on the reef. It's moving.'

Biggles sat up and looked. 'What do you make of it?'

'I haven't a clue. All I know is it's coming this way.'

At that moment a clue presented itself. For an instant an object like a serpent was clearly outlined against the moon-drenched sky.

'Strewth!' gasped Algy. 'That was a tentacle. It's an octopus, and a whopper.'

'Keep still. Don't make a noise.' 'It's coming here.'

'So I see. If it comes much nearer we shall have to do something to discourage it. If it took a fancy to the machine it wouldn't do it any good.'

They watched. The creature came on. Once, as the moonlight caught its eyes, Algy had to strangle an exclamation. They were white,

flat, like tea plates.

'I don't think it's an octopus,' Biggles said. 'It's too big. I fancy it must be a decapod; the sort I believe is called a cephalopod. I've never seen a live one, but there's a model of one in the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco. It's as long as the hall it's displayed in. Enormous. It has eight arms and two tentacles, which can be up to forty feet long. They're thought sometimes to come ashore at night. There are records of them seizing a canoe loaded with natives and dragging it under.'

'Charming,' murmured Algy. 'Isn't it time we were doing something about it ?'

'We haven't time to get the machine ashore if that's what you mean.'

'Perhaps this is what Collingwood had in mind when he wished us joy,' Algy said pointedly.

'I can hardly believe that.'

'He, doesn't want us here, that's obvious. It might suit him to see the plane wrecked so we couldn't report back to London.'

'If I thought he let us park ourselves here, knowing these monsters were in the habit of coming ashore, I'd knock his block off,' muttered Biggles savagely. 'I remember reading in a book by a sailor of a battle between one of these things and a whale; that'll give you an idea of the size they can be. I think this one's close enough. Fetch me a gun from the locker.'

Algy went aboard and returned with two automatic pistols that were kept for emergencies. Handing one to Biggles he said: 'It's loaded.'

Biggles took the weapon and walked slowly to the end of the reef, towards which the beast was still gliding.

'Careful,' warned Algy anxiously.

Biggles did not answer. He did not stop until he was about fifty feet from the monster. Then he raised the gun, and taking deliberate aim, fired. The shot appeared to have no effect. The decapod continued to slither along the reef. He fired again. Still no effect. He fired a third time. The creature threw up two great tentacles, waving, and let out a cry so mournful that to Algy it was like a current of cold air. Then it fell off the reef with a splash, fortunately on the deep water side. Biggles watched for a minute and returned to Algy.

'Did you kill it ?' asked Algy.

'I don't know. But I think I must have hurt it. I aimed between the eyes. If the horror has a brain I may have got it, but these deep-sea brutes take a lot of killing.'

'This is what I may have seen in the pool earlier, to cause that swirl which you thought was a shoal of small fish,' Algy said. 'Small fish. That's a joke.'

'You can bet I shall think twice before I do any more swimming,' returned Biggles, seriously.

They kept watch for some time, but they saw no more of the monster. 'We'll get the machine on dry land before tomorrow night,' stated Biggles.

After a while Algy said: 'I've something else to show you.' He fetched the piece of alleged phosphate. 'Take a look at that,' he invited. 'It's luminous. Now what do you make of it?'

Biggles studied the substance intently, turning it over and over in his hand before he answered. 'I wouldn't know. Might be some particles of gypsum in the stuff. This sort of thing isn't in my line.'

'It only shows in the dark. Could it be pitch-blende ; the stuff that yields radium?'

'No use asking me. I've never seen any.'

'Collingwood is here for something. Could this be it ?'

'I suppose it could be. But this is guessing. That's no use. If it wasn't so far to go I'd take this stuff to London and get professional opinion on it. I shall see Collingwood again in the morning; I may be able to get something out of him. At present we're working on suspicion. That isn't enough. But that beast doesn't seem to be coming back, so we might as well try to get some sleep. But I think it would be advisable to mount guard.'

'Thank goodness it fell into deep water and not in the lagoon,' Algy said. 'Anything like an octopus gives me the willies.'

'I've had a nap, so I'll take first watch,' offered Biggles. 'Do you think that's necessary?'

'I'd rather not take chances. That decapod, or whatever it was, might have a pal. I'll wake you in about four hours.'

In the event, with their brains active after what had happened, there was little sleep for either of them, and dawn rose out of the ocean to find them unrefreshed.

While Algy made coffee Biggles walked to the far side of the reef, and having surveyed the shore returned to say there was no sign of the creature that had ruined their night's rest.

CHAPTER 5

MORE PROBLEMS

BREAKFAST finished and toilet complete, Biggles said: 'Right. Now let's go and have a word with Collingwood.'

'You won't get much out of him,' predicted Algy.

'I wouldn't be too sure of that. He may have had second thoughts. We'll give him another chance. We've nothing to lose by trying.'

'What about the plane ? Are you going to leave it on the water ? You spoke of running it up on the sand.'

Biggles took a quick glance round the sky. 'That'll do when we come back. I'm still in two minds about going home for orders, so in case I do, it might be as well to let it stay where it is, to be ready.'

'What about that beast we saw last night ?' queried Algy.

'I don't think it'll come into the lagoon. From what I've read they usually stay in deep water and they don't normally come ashore in daylight. In fact, only rarely at night. I don't think we need worry about that. The machine should be all right.'

'What about Collingwood? I suppose he wouldn't interfere with it!'

'I can't see him doing anything as dirty as that. Besides, as we shall be with him I don't see how he could do anything, even if he contemplated it.'

They made their way again to the relics of the war, the huts, to find the man they wanted to see having a breakfast of cereals and tea with condensed milk.

'Now what do you want ?' he inquired coldly as they appeared in the doorway. 'Can't you leave me alone?'

'No,' answered Biggles, bluntly. 'I've come to ask you a question and I expect a straight answer. Did you know that decapods were in the habit of coming ashore along the reef?'

'What about it?'

Biggles' expression hardened. 'By thunder! You've got a crust. So you *did* know.'

'I've seen them, but they don't interfere with me.' 'They might have interfered with us, or our machine.' 'Did they?'

'Not to any great extent.'

'I wondered if that was what the shooting was about. I heard shots.'

'Why didn't you warn us?'

Collingwood's eyes opened wide with affected surprise. 'Why should I? I didn't invite you to come here. I thought you'd find out. I'm not a baby-sitter.' The last words were said with a sneer.

A baby-sitter is something we shan't need, as you'll learn,' retorted

Biggles grimly. 'You were hoping our aircraft would be damaged. Was that it?'

'Why should I pretend to be sorry if it had been ?'

'I see. So that's how you feel. Then let me take this opportunity of saying you're a stinker of a lower order than a skunk.' Biggles spoke with ice in his voice. Collingwood sipped his tea, apparently unconcerned.

'Have you finished ?'

'No, I haven't. Not by a long shot,' rapped back Biggles. 'Now you listen to me, Collingwood, and listen hard. I don't know what you're doing here, but if you wanted to be left alone you've gone the wrong way about it. Had you behaved like a civilized human being, I'd probably have gone home with nothing to report; but as you've chosen to be cantankerous, I shall stay here until I know just what sort of crooked business you're engaged in.'

'Be careful. I could sue you for slander.' { 'Go ahead and try it. That would suit me. If I'm forced to conclude that you're in some dishonest racket you've only yourself to blame. Come clean and I'll reconsider my decision, otherwise I shall stay.'

'You hope.'

'Am I to take that as a threat ?'

'You can take it how you like; but if you go on sticking your nose into my affairs you'll wish you'd never seen Jean Bonney Island.'

'One more crack like that and I'll put you under arrest.'

That made Collingwood look up from his breakfast. 'Indeed, and who are you to talk about arresting anyone?'

'We're police officers from Scotland Yard.' Biggles held up his authority. 'Now you know.'

'Know what ?'

'Why I'm here.'

'You're a long way from Scotland Yard,' taunted Collingwood.

'Not too far, as you'll learn. That's all.' Turning to Algy Biggles said: 'We're wasting our time.' He walked away.

Presently, Algy, who had gone with him, said: 'So he's one of these smart guys.'

'Maybe not as smart as he thinks he is. We shall see. Did you notice a queer smell in that hut ?'

'Yes, I did notice something, vaguely.' 'Did you recognize it ?'

'No.'

'Nor I. It reminded me of something. It'll come to me presently.'

'What do we do now?'

'Explore the island. That shouldn't take long.' Biggles headed for the lagoon. 'But before we do that we'll get the machine up high and dry,' he added, as they topped the rise overlooking the blue water. He stopped abruptly, staring at it. The next moment he was running flat out.

Algy did not have to look for the reason for this sudden burst of speed. It was the *Gadfly*. No longer fast at its mooring, it was free, in the middle of the lagoon, being wafted towards the outer perimeter of the reef by a gentle breeze that was now ruffling the water.

Algy had to make a quick decision about which course he should take. There was not much purpose in following Biggles, who would not need help if he could get to the machine before it came into collision with a reef, when it could hardly fail to do some damage. Noting the end of the reef for which Biggles was making, he dashed off towards the other end to catch the plane should a fresh slant of wind change its direction. This was the end on which the unpleasant night visitor had appeared; but he did not stop to think about that. The plane had to be saved at any risk. Nevertheless, when he reached the coral he cast an eye over the water on the deep side before starting along it.

It was rough, all shapes and as hard as iron, so now he had to be careful, for a fall could have serious consequences. It was no time for broken bones. Progress was complicated by trying to see how Biggles was faring and at the same time watch where he himself was putting his feet.

By this time Biggles was well along the reef, still running and obviously taking chances as he jumped from one shelf of coral to another. Two or three times it looked as if he would be able to intercept the plane before it brushed a wing against the coral, but always at the vital moment a slight change in the variable breeze caused it to veer off on a new course. Biggles, of course, had to move his position every time to keep level with it.

Algy hurried on at the best speed he could make, with the result that they were soon close together although on opposite sides of the opening into the open sea. Through this a falling tide was surging like a millrace, obviously dangerous, in that a swimmer would certainly be swept out to sea. At one time it looked as if the machine would be carried through it, as it would have been had it come within the influence of the backwash of water.

Fortunately this did not happen; nor did the necessity of trying to swim across the breach arise, for presently another slight gust of wind carried the aircraft over to Algy's side. It floated to within twenty

yards of him, and looked like coming nearer, but then, for no apparent reason, it began to move farther away. It seemed to Algy that this was a chance not to be lost. Just as he was, without even taking off his shoes, he dived into the lagoon and at his fastest stroke struck out for the runaway plane.

He caught it and, not without difficulty, managed to grab an elevator. On to this he dragged himself, and then on to the top of the fuselage. Sitting astride he worked his way along it to the cockpit. The rest was easy. The engines started at first try and the machine was under control. He took it close enough to the reef for Biggles to climb on board and then taxied to the original mooring.

'Great work, old warrior,' Biggles said, as he stepped ashore. 'How this happened I can't imagine. This is a new nylon rope. Brand-new for the trip. I put it on myself. It couldn't have broken.' He picked up the mooring rope and examined the end. The expression on the face he then turned to Algy was as black as a thundercloud. 'So that's it,' he muttered. 'It was cut. Look!'

Algy looked at the end Biggles was holding out for his inspection, then at the end he held in his hand, the end of the line that had been attached to the machine. There was no sign of fraying. The cut was clean, as sheer as if it had been sliced through with a razor.

'There's something wrong about this,' Algy said, looking bewildered. 'How could it have been cut?'

'I don't know how, but it was cut; there can be no argument about that,' declared Biggles viciously.

'Well, there's one thing quite certain,' stated Algy. 'Collingwood couldn't have done it. We've been with him from the time we left here. He couldn't have got here without us seeing him.'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'You're right. It couldn't have been Collingwood.'

'So what's the answer?'

'Obviously, if it wasn't Collingwood it must have been someone else.'

'There isn't anyone else.'

'There *must* be. It's the only answer. How do we know there's no one else here? We haven't been over the island yet.'

'A friend of Collingwood's?'

'I don't know about a friend, but clearly it's someone working with him. They've been together since we arrived. They fixed this. Either Collingwood told his partner to cut the rope or the other fellow, seeing us leave the plane unguarded, decided to do a bit of sabotaging

on his own account.'

Algy's forehead wrinkled in a puzzled frown. 'But I still don't get it. What was the idea of trying to wreck the machine? Collingwood said he doesn't want us here, and from the way he's behaved he doesn't; yet by putting the machine out of action he'd make certain of keeping us here. It doesn't make sense.'

Biggles considered the problem. 'I can see only one explanation of that. Now he knows we suspect him of doing something improper, if not actually criminal, he doesn't want us to get back to London. I may have made a mistake in telling him we were from Scotland Yard. He knew about the decapods. Why didn't he warn us? He hoped one of them would do his dirty work for him. When he realized it had failed he lost no time in having another go.'

'Even so he can't suppose he can keep us here indefinitely.'

'Without an aircraft we could be stuck here for some time; long enough, perhaps, to suit his purpose. For all we know he may not intend to stay here much longer himself. Then he might sail away leaving us here. Once clear he would take some finding.'

'Did you say *sail* away?'

'It seems likely that's how he'll go when he departs. That breach wasn't made in the reef to improve the landscape. That must have been quite a big job. If Collingwood and his partner didn't actually do it, they must know all about it. They may have been brought here in an aircraft, but I have a feeling that when they leave it'll be in a ship.'

Algy nodded. 'The plane isn't here now, so if that's the way they arrived it must have been flown away. That would make at least three people concerned with what's going on here.'

'It begins to look like that. But let's come to the immediate position. We're up against a snag I didn't expect. We can't leave the machine unguarded for fear of another attempt to wreck it. As that's already been tried it's reasonable to suppose they'll have another go. If the machine went west with all our stores while we were absent, we'd find ourselves living on coconuts, or having to beg grub from Collingwood.'

'I'd rather choke than ask him for anything.'

'So would I. Well, there it is. One of us will always have to be with the plane. It cramps our style for any exploring, but I can see no alternative. From now on we'd better carry pistols and one or two spare clips of cartridges. Then if they get really rough we'll be ready.'

'Don't you think it'd be a good thing to go home, while we can, to report?'

'Report what?'

'What we've found going on here.'

'But we don't know what's going on. That's the trouble. What could we say? We found a man. The chief will say, "What's he doing there?" We say we don't know. The chief will say, "Why don't you know? Go back and find out." So we come back and start again where we left off, which is how we stand at this moment. Or perhaps not quite. What fools we should look if we came back to find the birds had flown. We came here to do a job, so let's do it. I don't know what these birds are doing, but before I set course for home I want to know what it is. I'm going to get to the bottom of this.'

'Okay, old boy. What suits you suits me. What's our next move ? Run the machine up on the sand like you said ?'

Biggles hesitated. 'I don't like that. I want to have a scout round. If I left you on the beach you'd be vulnerable to an attack. I think it would be better if, when I've gone, you took the machine well out into the lagoon and let her ride at anchor. Then no one could get near you without being seen. Moreover, if things got serious you could fly her off. You wait on the lagoon. When I come back I'll give you a hail and you can bring her in to pick me up.'

'What if the weather changes ?'

'I'd see the change coming and come back to you at the double.'

'Fair enough. Let's do that,' agreed Algy.

'Before I move off we'd better have a bite to eat while things are quiet,' Biggles said. 'Then I'll get on with it.'

'There's one thing about your scheme that doesn't exactly send me wild with enthusiasm,' Algy said. 'You haven't by any chance forgotten there's a thing called a decapod in the offing? I'd rather be involved in an argument with Collingwood than find myself engaged in a wrestling match with a slimy horror with ten arms.'

'I don't think you need worry about that,' returned Biggles confidently. 'With three bullets in its midriff, if it isn't dead it must be feeling a bit sick. It'll stay in deep water. I can't see it coming into the lagoon.'

'If the entrance is wide enough for a ship, it must be wide enough for anything that lives in the sea,' argued Algy.

'The lagoon would be too shallow.'

'I sincerely hope you're right, brother,' retorted Algy. 'What about that swirl I saw ? It must have been caused by something.'

Biggles grinned. 'If you see its periscope pop up make for the shore,' he suggested lightly.

'It isn't funny, so don't expect me to split my sides laughing,'

protested Algy. 'And you needn't tell me what to do. Any sign of one leg, never mind ten, and I shall be up the beach so fast that a thing with twenty legs wouldn't be able to keep up with me. If, as you say, one of these monsters has been known to pull down a boat load of natives, I'd hate to think what it could do to an aircraft. However, it's your machine....'

Nothing more was said on the subject. After a quick snack Algy took the *Gadfly* out on to the tranquil water of the lagoon. Biggles watched until the anchor splashed overboard; then, with a parting wave he turned to his self-imposed task.

CHAPTER 6

MYSTERY AFTER MYSTERY

BIGGLES went first to the top of the rise and reconnoitred the landing strip in the direction of the Nissen huts. This was not because he was afraid of Collingwood or anything he might do; for when all was said and done it he had more right to be there than the man whom he now regarded with deep suspicion. It was simply that he preferred Collingwood not to know that he had gone off leaving Algy alone. When Algy had started the engines to move the aircraft to its new position on the lagoon, the noise would almost certainly bring Collingwood out to see what was happening. However, there was no sign of him, so after a glance at the still serene sky to make sure that no change in the weather was impending, he set off on his tour of inspection, following the shore and thus keeping below the rising ground where he might be seen.

To reach the far end of the island in the shortest time it would have been a lot easier to walk down the old runway, which was level and reasonably clear; but as this would put him in view of the huts, which he was anxious to avoid in case Collingwood came out, he took the more arduous route along the sea-shore. Where there was a beach this presented no difficulty, but more often than not the foreshore was rocky and piled with the debris of countless storms. Here it was necessary to pick his way. But he had this consolation. The maximum length of the little island set a limit to the distance he would have to walk to reach the extreme end. Even with rough going he reckoned this would not take more than an hour at most, so, all being well, he should be back with Algy long before it began to get dark. His plan was to go to the coconut grove, at the far end of the island, by the coast route, and then walk back up the middle; that is, up the landing

strip; because then it wouldn't matter if Collingwood did see him. It would be a different matter had he been seen going off, because in that case Collingwood would know Algy was alone. and try to take advantage of it. The cut rope was an indication of how far he was prepared to go in order to dispose of them.

Biggles, of course, had not the remotest idea of what he was looking for, or hoping to find; but he was sure there must be something; something Collingwood didn't want him to see. He could not imagine what it could be ; yet he could not believe that a man of Collingwood's class and education would deliberately choose to isolate himself from the rest of the world for no reason whatsoever. And if his purpose there was honest, why had he been at such pains to let visitors know they were unwelcome?

At all events, Biggles thought this first reconnaissance, even though it was no more than a broad survey covering most of the island, might yield a clue as to what was going on. Once beyond the end of the old landing ground, and therefore out of sight of the huts, from time to time he climbed to a high point to study the ground thus brought into view.

In this way he nearly completed his outward journey without seeing anything to arouse his curiosity. Nothing worth a closer inspection. The coconut palms, which had all the time been a conspicuous landmark, were now not far ahead.. Presently he realized the probable reason why they were there. Hitherto most of the ground he had seen was rocky; either rock and sand; but now these conditions underfoot began to give way to drifts of what looked like reasonably fertile soil, perhaps dirt thrown up by storms of exceptional severity.

At one place he took a long look at a depression, almost a little valley, protected on both sides by sloping walls of sandy-looking rock. What attracted his attention was the vegetation that flourished at the bottom. One side was quite a jungle of shrubs, weeds and the like. This, he reasoned, was an obvious sign of fertility, but it offered no promise of a solution to the problem with which he was faced. There was nobody there, so he passed on.

So he came to the palms that he intended should be the end of his journey, for not far beyond them the surf of the open sea was beating on a stony beach. As he drew near his pace slowed in surprise at seeing signs of cultivation. There was no sign of anyone working, and there appeared to be only one crop, perhaps half an acre, or a little more, of what at first he took to be maize, not yet in cob. Having satisfied himself that there was nobody there, he walked nearer, deep in thought, and so came to the conclusion that there was no real cause for surprise at finding a patch of corn, although at first sight it had

been 'startling. The ground, he observed, was good fertile soil, so this was the place Collingwood would naturally choose if he decided to raise his own cereals. There were not many places where this would be possible. Collingwood had certainly put in some work, he thought, observing the stumps of palms that had been felled to extend the area for cultivation. There were plenty of windblown nuts under the surviving trees, so apparently Collingwood didn't trouble to collect them.

He walked right up to the crop. As he did so his expression began to change, first to astonishment then to understanding. 'So *that's* it,' he muttered, his hand going to the pocket where he kept his gun and taking a swift look around in case he was being watched. But there was nobody there; not that there was any reason for anyone to be there, he thought. The crop would take care of itself until it was ready for harvesting.

He did not linger in the vicinity. There was no need. He had found the answer. He had seen — or thought he had seen — all that was necessary. All he had to do now was get back to the lagoon as quickly as possible by the shortest route. With eyes alert for danger, for he did not forget that Collingwood had a partner somewhere as was proved by the cut mooring rope, he set off, making straight for the nearest point of the runway. As for Collingwood, he no longer cared if he was seen by him. He now had a few things to say to him, when he was ready. But that could come later, when he had spoken to Algy and had told him what he had found.

He reached the end of the landing strip, but ducked back into cover when he saw Collingwood approaching in haste from the opposite direction. At first he thought he must have been seen, but there was something about Collingwood's manner that caused him to change his mind. Why the hurry? What was he going to do? He was still wearing his dirt-streaked denims; but what at that moment struck Biggles as even more odd was the small hand shovel he held in one hand and a light haversack, that appeared to be empty, slung from a shoulder. For what purpose were they intended? They were not the sort of things he would need to work on his crop. So reasoned Biggles.

Collingwood, who obviously had not seen him, was still striding along like a man who knew exactly where he was going and what he intended to do. Biggles, more than ever puzzled, crouched back into the cover of some bushes prepared to watch, hoping to satisfy his mounting curiosity. Collingwood went straight past him. He gave him a minute to get clear and then stood up to see where he had gone, although in his mind there was no doubt about his destination. Where else could he be going except to his crop ?

He was not to be seen. Biggles found this hard to believe, but the fact remained, he couldn't see him. Where could he have gone in such a short time? He moved to another position and again looked around. Still he could not see him. He walked back, slowly, a little way, eyes still searching, until he had a clear view of the crop under cultivation. He was not there. Biggles had been sure this was his destination. He could think of no other possibility. He stared. He listened. He was afraid to move far for fear of being seen, or of suddenly meeting Collingwood face to face. This, he thought, was extraordinary, and it is understandable that he was mystified.

Rather than stand in an exposed position in case Collingwood reappeared as quickly as he had disappeared, he sat down. He wanted to think. There had to be an explanation of this new mystery. What could the man be doing? How could he have vanished so completely and so quickly? Why had he come here at all if not to tend his crop? It was not easy to imagine he was merely out for a walk. His whole manner had been one of urgency. Biggles decided the only thing he could do was wait for him to show himself.

He crouched, waiting for this to happen, confident that Collingwood could not get back to the runway without being seen. The ground was mostly open, and, after all, he could not know he had been watched. So Biggles waited. Time passed. Half an hour; an hour, and still he squatted. He was now beginning to get worried. The sun was already low, and falling visibly, as it will — or appear to — in a clear sky in the tropics. Finally, at long last, with the shadows of the palms lengthening, he could only conclude that he had lost his man. Collingwood must by now be on his way back to the huts, if in fact he had not already reached his home. How this could have happened was not easy to understand; yet, what could he possibly be doing to occupy so much time? The only sound was the growling of the breakers on the exposed beach. That was incessant, and like any regular noise was hardly noticed.

Anyway, Biggles decided it was pointless to wait any longer. Already he had been away from the lagoon much longer than he intended, or imagined he would be. Algy would be wondering what could have happened to him.

Suspecting he had run into trouble, perhaps met with an accident, in his natural anxiety he would probably come to look for him. Biggles didn't want that to happen if for no other reason than it would leave the aircraft unguarded. Stiffly, as a result of being so long in a cramped position, he stood up.

Before he had time to take a step he had sunk down again as to his ears came a sound he certainly did not expect to hear, although on

reflection he realized that he should not have been so surprised because there was good reason to believe Collingwood was not alone on the island. The sound he had heard was voices; human voices, engaged in what seemed to be normal conversation. So that was it. Collingwood had met his companion, friend, assistant, or in whatever capacity he might be. The voices were not far away, but not close enough for him to hear what was being said. Peering through the coarse grass he saw the speakers appear. One, of course, was Collingwood. That was to be expected, so there was nothing remarkable about that. What was surprising was that the other should be a coloured man. Biggles took him to be an Indian, not so much perhaps on account of the colour of his skin as because India was the nearest mainland. He was an older man than Collingwood, dressed native fashion and altogether an unpleasant-looking type. From a belt hung a heavy knife, or dagger. He passed close enough for Biggles to see that his face was badly pitted by smallpox, although for that he was not to be blamed.

So this, thought Biggles, was the man who had cut the mooring rope. He was obviously working with Collingwood. He seemed a strange companion for such a man.

Biggles watched. With what interest he watched can be imagined. He noted that Collingwood's haversack now appeared to be full. He still carried the little hand-shovel. The two men, apparently on the best of terms, passed on to the beginning of the old landing strip. He watched them until they were out of sight and then moved quickly; quickly in order to make the most of what daylight remained, for it was already fading. But he felt he could not leave the place until he had learned the purpose of Collingwood's visit or discover where he had found his coloured companion. This posed another problem. From where could he have appeared? Why hadn't he seen him? Or what was even more likely, why hadn't the man seen him? Obviously he had not. There was something very queer about this.

Biggles now walked through the herbage to strike at right angles the track the two men must have left even if there was no actual pathway. He had no difficulty in finding it. The grass had been flattened by being walked on, not once, he thought, but several times. He followed it back. This brought him to the depression, or hollow, the little valley he had observed earlier. He had forgotten about it. So this was where the coloured man had been. Both men, in fact. The footmarks led down into it. He followed them down.

At the bottom they disappeared. There was not a sign of human interference. There was no hut, or tent, as if someone had been living there. This again, Biggles thought, was most extraordinary. One side

of the hollow was practically bare, with little vegetation. There was certainly nothing there. The other side was a tangle of shrubs, including one or two young, stunted date palms, as if someone had been eating dates and the stones had germinated. Not that Biggles wasted any time thinking about this.

If there was anything in the hollow, he reasoned, and he thought there must be something or why had the men been there, it could only be behind the shrubs. Moving forward into them, parting the twigs in front of him, he saw he was right. A black hole yawned in the bank. It was hardly large enough to be called a cave, although it seemed to go back some distance. Anyhow, it was large enough to allow a man to enter, and the regularity of the sides showed that it was man-made, not a natural formation.

Biggles went close and considered it. He peered inside, but the interior, naturally, was pitch-dark and he could see nothing. To say he was astonished would be to put it mildly. He was amazed. The cultivation above he could understand, but this had him completely baffled. Why a hole? For what had the men been digging? For that they had been digging was made evident by an implement like an army entrenching tool, pointed at one end and broad at the other, lying on the ground. Gold? It was not the sort of place one would expect to find gold. Treasure? A pirate might have buried his treasure on the island, but why make a tunnel to hide it? It didn't make sense.

He examined the sides of the hole and the stuff that had been excavated, lying at his feet. It was the same material as the piece he had picked up in the hut. Collingwood had said it was phosphate. This he could not believe. The stuff in bulk might have a commercial value, but it could not come into the category of being precious or he must have heard of it. It seemed to Biggles that he had solved one problem only to set himself another.

In a last attempt not to be thwarted he flicked on his petrol lighter and went in a little way; but the small, flickering flame, revealed nothing new except that the hole went in for some distance; too far for him to see the end. He thought it prudent to turn back. Later, with the torch from the aircraft the place could be more closely investigated. He was anxious not to be caught in the dark so far away from the lagoon; nor did he want to encounter the coloured man should he return to the hollow. He retreated into the daylight, now fast fading, and set off for the lagoon, putting his best foot forward.

When he came to within sight of it he stopped. The *Gadfly* was not as he had left it, on the water. Presently he made it out, ashore on one of the little beaches of coral sand. He could not see Algy. Alarmed, afraid something had happened, he broke into a run.

CHAPTER 7

WORRY FOR ALGY

ALGY had watched Biggles until he was out of sight; then, with the *Gadfly* motionless at anchor he subjected his surroundings to a searching scrutiny. First the reef. He could see nothing of interest. The only living things were a few small groups of sea birds, mostly boobies and gannets. He studied the surface of the lagoon. No stretch of water ever looked more peaceful. Except for a slight ruffle inside the break in the reef, it might have been a sheet of blue ice, pale turquoise in the shallow parts and shading to ultramarine and purple where the water ran deeper. He turned his attention to the main body of the island thinking he might see Collingwood. He was not in sight, but the slight rise beyond the water-line prevented him from seeing the actual huts or the abandoned landing ground at the end of which they stood. Silence reigned except for the non-stop murmur of breakers on the distant beach. Like Crusoe he might have been monarch of all he surveyed.

Satisfied with his inspection he settled down in the cockpit, from which he had a view in every direction, to await Biggles' return. The weather seemed set fair. The air was warm. Not a cloud in the sky. The conditions were conducive to sleep, but he resolved to keep awake and alert. He did not think Collingwood would try anything while he was on board, but he was taking no chances.

Yet inevitably, with nothing to do, under the influence of the unchanging scene, he fell into a reverie, deriving some slight amusement from the position in which he found himself. As a boy, as a result of reading romantic and mostly imaginative stories of desert islands and coral atolls, uninhabited of course, he would have asked nothing more than to find himself on one. Now, perhaps unfortunately, he reflected, he knew better; knew that conditions of life on what was supposed to be a little earthly paradise were not in accord with the truth. That was known from men who had in fact, as opposed to fiction, experienced the ordeal and had managed to survive. How many unfortunate mariners, victims of shipwreck, had perished miserably, he wondered. Hundreds. Possibly thousands. Their numbers would never be known. This could be judged by the records of those who had been lucky enough to be rescued.

Richard Falconer was one of them. He found himself on a 'desert isle' through his own carelessness. He was lazing in a dinghy, being

towed by the ship of which he was one of the crew, when the tow-rope broke. He was lucky, after drifting for days, to be thrown ashore on an island. A real desert island. The population consisted of rats and seagulls and on these he had to exist. The only water was rainwater that collected in the rocks and he suffered terribly from thirst before eventually he was seen by a passing ship and taken off.

Philip Ashton was another sailor who was overjoyed at being rescued from an island paradise. He deserted his ship at Ruatan Island, off the coast of South America. For nine months, until he was rescued, he found life so unbearable that he often contemplated suicide.

What, pondered Algy, had become of the people who had been cast away on the lonely Crozet Islands in the South Indian Ocean? Their plight became known to the world when a dead seagull was found on the coast of Western Australia. Around its neck was a tin band in which had been punched laboriously with a nail the words: *Thirteen castaways on CROZET ISLAND. Help for the love of God.* Help was sent, but no one was found, so the fate of these unfortunates will never be known. Of course, the seagull might have lived for years with the message round its neck.

Alexander Selkirk, the original of Robinson Crusoe, was, as we know, put ashore at his own request after a row with his captain. But that was a different matter altogether as he was able to choose his island; and he took care to choose one, Juan Fernandez in the Pacific, where he was not likely to suffer any serious privation apart from loneliness. He had the advantage of being able to take ashore with him things that would be useful. Even so he was glad enough to be taken off after he had been on the island four years and four months.

Thus soliloquized Algy. regarding his own little desert island without enthusiasm. He had seen enough of it to discourage any ideas of settling on it. Collingwood could have it. all of it. as far as he was concerned. Algy was glad to know he would have the means of turning his back on it when the time came.

From these sober deliberations he was jolted into the world of reality, literally jolted, by a bump from below. not severe but sufficient to cause mild alarm. His first thought was that the aircraft must have dragged its anchor and drifted to a part of the lagoon where the water was more shallow than there had been reason to suspect; or perhaps a formation of coral had been built up nearly to the surface. They had not been all over it, having had no reason to do so.

He looked over the port side. There appeared to be plenty of water. although it was so clear that it was not easy to judge the depth. A variety of fishes swimming about reassured him that the water was

there. Moving his position he looked down over the starboard side. There was no coral near the surface there. either. All he could see was the long black shadow of the aircraft. That was what he took it to be until it slowly dawned on him that such a shadow, from the position of the sun, was a physical impossibility. He stared down. And as he stared the shadow moved a trifle. But it had certainly moved; or part of it, one end, had moved. How, as the plane was stationary? Then from the shape, he realized the truth. It was a shark. Not one of the enormous brutes that are known to exist, but large enough, about ten or twelve feet long, to make Algy feel uncomfortable. He did not for a moment think the creature would deliberately attack the aircraft; sharks didn't attack ships, or if they did he had never heard of a case; but he would have preferred it farther away. He dismissed any ideas he had of taking a plunge to keep himself wide awake.

It was evident that for some reason known only to itself the creature had come close enough to the aircraft to bump its back on the hull. What could it be doing? Scratching sealice off its back? Whatever it was Algy hoped the performance would not be repeated. Too much of it would do the machine no good. He settled back in his seat prepared to forget the incident.

In this he was over-optimistic. A few minutes later came another bump. This time he was not caught unprepared and in a flash he was again looking over the side; this time to see the big fish sinking slowly to the bottom. This was too much. If the beast was going to make a practice of this sort of thing something would have to be done about it, or the shark, becoming bolder, might do some serious mischief; cause the hull to spring a leak, or even knock a large hole in the bottom. For while a flying-boat is robust enough for its normal work, it will not take much knocking about. Clearly, something would have to be done about it.

What was the thing doing there in the lagoon, thought Algy angrily. There was much more room in the sea. Had it perhaps found the new breach in the reef and come in to have a look round? It was obviously not hungry, for there were plenty of fish, its normal diet, all round it. Perhaps it would not persist in its unsharklike antics. He would give it one more chance.

For a while it seemed as if this hope might be fulfilled. All remained quite. Algy looked over the side two or three times thinking it had gone; but it was still there, its tail swinging lazily to maintain its position. Through the clear water he could see an evil little eye looking up at him. Just as he had decided the brute was tired of playing games, if that was its idea, the aircraft was shaken by such a jolt that he was lifted in his seat. This really startled him. Obviously

this could not be allowed to go on. It was no use shooting at the thing through so much water. It was unlikely that the bullet would even reach it. If it did, and stung it, it might cause it to throw r itself about to the peril of the machine.

After giving the matter some thought he decided the best thing, in fact, the only thing, he could do, was move the aircraft to another place, trusting the shark would not follow. Moving with care in case there was another jolt, for he had no wish to find himself overboard, he pulled on the anchor rope. The anchor did not move. When the water had settled he could see the reason. A fluke had caught in a growth of coral. He pulled the machine directly above it and tried again, now a vertical haul. The anchor refused to budge an inch. Algy swore softly. Everything was being as awkward as it could be. It was evident that if he wanted to move the machine the anchor would have to remain where it was, anyhow for the time being, although eventually it would have to be released, because to be without it would raise difficulties later. Had the shark not been there it would have been a simple matter to dive down and unhook the fluke; but in the circumstances that was not to be considered, even though there was no indication that the shark was a man-eater. The chances were that it was not, but Algy was not prepared to risk it.

The only alternative was to slip the anchor. By marking its position it could be recovered later. That meant fastening the end of the line to some sort of flotation gear. No trouble about that. An emergency lifebelt would do the job. He fetched one from the cabin, untied the anchor rope, attached the lifebelt and tossed it over- board. To his horror the shark floated up and had a good look at it. For a horrid moment he thought it was going to eat it. Sharks have been known to swallow strange articles. However, it sank back to the bottom without interfering with it.

Algy proceeded with his plan. He started the engines, moved the machine to a new position and again looked down. To his annoyance the shark was still there, apparently having followed the aircraft, or its shadow on the bottom. It seemed more active.

That settled it. Collingwood or no Collingwood it would be better to run the machine up on the beach, as had been the original intention. This he did without any difficulty, the operation hastened by the now setting sun. With the machine well up on the coral sand he switched off and prepared to resume his vigil. Now that he had settled with the shark he had another worry. Biggles, who had been absent longer than had been expected. He hoped nothing had gone wrong. He gave himself a quick drink from a can of orange juice in the cabin and then went to the top of the rise to see if the noise of the engines had

brought out Collingwood. There was no sign of him.

It must have been while he was there, surveying the huts, that Biggles came into view, for when he returned to the aircraft and looked along the shore he saw him coming. He saw him break into a run and could guess the reason. He would be alarmed to see the machine ashore and was in a hurry to know why it had been taken off the water.

Biggles' first words, when he arrived somewhat breathless, confirmed this. He said, all in one sentence: 'What's happened —why have you come ashore ?'

'I had to. A shark started to have fun and games knocking the machine about.'

Biggles stared incredulously. 'A shark! Sharks don't do that sort of thing.'

'This one did. Kept bumping itself against the keel. Don't ask me why. I can't think like a shark. Maybe it was only trying to scrape some barnacles off its back. I don't think it meant any harm, but I thought too much of it wouldn't do the machine any good, so I decided to move to a different position hoping it would lay off. When I tried I found the anchor had stuck under some coral. I couldn't move it. It's still there. I had to slip my cable. I left a marker on it. Anyway, I thought I'd better come ashore while the ship was in one piece. That's all.

If you're thinking of taking a plunge to wipe off the sweat, don't forget you won't be alone in the water.'

'Great grief!' exclaimed Biggles. 'What next! It wouldn't be surprising to find a shark in the lagoon now there's a gap in the reef, but why it should fiddle about with a plane is beyond my imagination.'

'Maybe it took the machine for an overgrown duck.'

'This is no joking matter. At least, I don't think you'll find anything funny about it if, with that thing in the water, we have to dive to get the anchor free. Be a pal and fetch me a drink. I've put in some hard work and I'm as dry as a chip.'

Algy brought a mug of orange juice. 'I believe swordfish have been known to break off their swords in the bottoms of moving ships, but I've never heard of a shark trying anything like that.' Biggles emptied the mug in one swig. 'That's better.'

'What about you ?' inquired Algy. 'Did you find anything ?'

'Plenty. Too much. So much that it's got me completely foxed. I thought the first thing I found was the answer to everything. Now I don't know what to think. Sit down and I'll tell you all about it. I fancy

this is going to shake you.'

'You're not putting the plane back on the water ?'

'Not tonight. Now it's ashore it might as well stay ashore. It simply means we shall have to keep watch.'

They sat on the sand facing the ridge so that no one could approach the aircraft without being seen.

'Don't talk to me about desert islands,' grumbled Biggles. 'What with decapods, sharks, and, as I believe, crooks, this one seems to have got the lot. Listen. I'll tell you.' He lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER 8

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

'YOU remember that as a result of our cable being cut we decided there must be someone else on the island,' began Biggles. 'Well, we were right. I've seen him. He's a coloured type. Indian, I think. But I'll come back to that presently. We'll start at the beginning and take things in order. The first eye-opener I dropped on, at the far end of the island near the coconuts, was a nice little plantation of Indian hemp.'

'The drug! The stuff from which they get *hashish*?'

'That's what they call it in Egypt and the Middle East, where it's smoked. The dope has different names in various countries according to how it's prepared and used. In India, where it more or less takes the place of tobacco in England, it's eaten, not smoked. It can be *Bhang*, or *Ganglia*, which is simply dried hemp leaves, or a manufactured product called *Charas*. I don't know what the position is there now, but when I was a boy it was allowed to be sold in the open market, although only in very small packets. Too much of it will send you round the bend.'

'Then why did we allow it in India at all?'

'I can only suppose that any attempt to suppress it would start a black market. As with other drugs, addicts will pay anything for it. They must have it at any price. For smugglers it's big business. I once saw some which the police had seized. It was in bricks about ten inches by five and an inch and a half thick. It's dark, brown, waxy stuff that smells a bit like resin. That's when it has been pressed. The leaves are gathered and rubbed to powder, then pressed into cakes.'

'So Collingwood's a drug addict,' murmured Algy. 'Well — well. I suppose he thought that here it'd be safe to grow as much as he liked.'

'I didn't say he was a drug addict although, naturally, that was my

first impression. I must say I was surprised because Collingwood showed no signs of it. They usually do, and the longer they go on the more obvious it becomes. When I remembered the queer smell in the hut, and my memory reminded me it was the odour of *hashish*, I thought I'd found the answer to what Collingwood was doing here; but now I'm not sure, unless he's running two rackets at the same time, which I must admit doesn't sound likely. One would suppose one would be enough in a place like this. But with a fellow like Collingwood one never knows what he will get up to if the fancy takes him.'

'You're not going to tell me you've found something else,' Algy said in a surprised voice.

'I certainly am. Listen to this. Perhaps you can make something of it. I can't. Just this side of the coconuts there's a depression in the ground, a little hollow. You might almost call it a short valley, with steep sides, one side in particular. Collingwood came along. I lost him for a little while. This is where he must have gone, although I didn't realize it at the time. It couldn't have been anywhere else or I must have seen him. And it must have been there that he picked up his Indian pal, who, incidentally, came back here with him. After they'd gone I back-tracked them to the valley and found they'd been digging. That would account for the dirty denims Collingwood wears. It isn't the first time he's been there.'

'What on earth could he be digging for?'

'I still haven't a clue, but the stuff he's burrowing into is the same as the piece I picked up in the hut. He called it phosphate.'

'Do you believe that?'

'Frankly, I just don't know. I wouldn't have thought it worth anyone's while to dig for anything except a precious metal on an island so far from anywhere. What he's done —or the Indian may have done it —is drive a horizontal shaft into the bank. It's behind some bushes, so you wouldn't suspect it was there. The thing, which is really no more than a rough tunnel just big enough to get into, looks like a sort of mine. Without a light I couldn't see much of it, but I'm thinking of going back with a torch.'

'You're sure it isn't a natural cave?'

'It didn't look like that to me. There was a tool there that must have been used for digging; otherwise how would it get there?'

'Could Collingwood have got wind of a treasure you know, a pirate hoard sort of thing — being buried on the island?'

'It's just possible; but why should a pirate, unless he was crazy, dig a horizontal hole in a cliff when it would be easier to make a hole in

the ground, drop his loot in and cover it up? No, this doesn't look to me like a pirate treasure hunt.'

'Gold ore?'

'The stuff isn't metallic ore, I'm pretty sure of that.'

'Diamonds?'

'Possibly, but I can't imagine diamonds being found on an island of this sort. As I told you, the thing has got me completely foxed. There's only one thing I am sure of, and it's this. Collingwood isn't digging that hole just for fun, or to give himself something to do. He's after something, something which he must know, or has jolly good reason to believe, is there. He's no fool; you can take that from me.'

'Could it be pitch-blende, the stuff that yields radium? I believe that's luminous in the dark.'

'So are several things. I've never seen any pitchblende, so I wouldn't know. I've never heard of it being found in this part of the world, although that, of course, isn't proof that it doesn't occur here, or in this part of Asia. It may be awaiting discovery, as has happened elsewhere. Actually, I believe pitch-blende is uranium oxide, although I may be wrong in that; so as uranium has a particular value to the lunatic nuclear bombmakers who seem determined to blow the world to smithereens, that might be the answer. But it doesn't make sense.

None of this crazy business makes sense. After all, if there is something precious here, why the devil should Collingwood fiddle about with poisonous muck like *hashish*?'

'Shall I tell you what I think?' Algy said.

'Go ahead. I'm prepared to listen to anything that might help to unravel this tangle.'

'Right. During the war Collingwood was a pilot in the RAF. He was put on this Bonney Island service. He might have been stationed here. Either way he got to know the place. I don't see how otherwise he would know the island even existed. We've been about quite a bit and we didn't know. While he was here, being a clever fellow, perhaps not long down from university, he spotted something worth having. He couldn't do anything about it at the time, but he didn't forget it, and when the war was over he came back here to cash in on it.'

'On what? That's what I want to know. You still haven't told me. Otherwise your theory probably isn't far off the beam. Then why not apply to the government for a concession and do the job properly? It isn't as though the island belonged to a foreign country. He knew it was British. That would have been so simple. And where does the hemp come in? Why fiddle with drugs?'

'I'd say because he'd picked up the habit and couldn't bear the

thought of being stuck here without any. By growing it himself he made sure of a constant supply. A cigarette addict like you might do the same thing with tobacco.'

Biggles shook his head. 'You make it sound reasonable, but I don't go for it. The fact is, there's still a piece missing from this particular jigsaw, and until we find it we're not likely to be able to complete the picture. Where does this Indian, or whoever he is, fit into it ?'

'That's one I can't answer.'

'And where are we going to look for the missing piece?'

'No use asking me. Are we going to spend the night ashore?'

'Might as well. There's not much point in trying to get the machine back on the water tonight, particularly as we've lost our anchor. To recover it will be our first job in the morning.' Biggles looked around. It was now quite dark with the moon just peeping over the horizon. Suddenly his attitude tensed. 'Don't move,' he said softly. 'We're being watched.' Slowly his hand went to his pistol pocket.

Algy sat still, watching, but ready to move fast. Suddenly, as if impelled by a spring Biggles leapt to his feet and in six quick strides reached a clump of dwarf palmetto scrub. 'All right! Come out. I can see you,' he ordered crisply: Then he repeated it in a language that Algy took to be Hindi.

A dark figure detached itself from the thicket and with hands held up stood erect. 'Don't shoot, sir,' said a voice, in English, that was certainly not Collingwood's. It was guttural in pitch and had a strong, curious accent.

Algy joined Biggles as he rapped out a question. 'Who are you ?'

'Name Ali, sir ' was the answer.

'Did Collingwood send you here to spy on us ?'

'No, sir .'

'Then why did you come ?'

'To tell you go home.'

'Why?'

'For your health. You stay you find trouble. Me like English mans.'

'That's a likely tale,' sneered Biggles.

'I tell true. Swear on Koran.'

'What part of India do you come from ?'

'Not go India. Me born Aden. Once I soldier in Arab Levies.'

'So you're an Arab ?'

'Yes, sir.'

Biggles glanced at Algy. 'Seems I was wrong,' he said dryly. 'I have

a feeling this fellow might be telling the truth.' Then, to the Arab:
'How did Mr Collingwood bring you here ?'

'Not bring. I am here when he come. Me live here.'

Biggles frowned. 'You say you live here ?'

'Yes, mister.'

'How did you get here ?'

'Ship bring me.'

'But you work for Mr Collingwood ?'

'Some time.'

'He pays you ?'

'Yes, mister .'

'Did he pay you to cut our mooring rope ?' accused Biggles.

The man moved his feet uncomfortably.

'Come on. Out with it,' snapped Biggles impatiently.

Before the Arab could answer: 'What's going on ?' inquired a voice from the top of the rise. This time, unmistakably, it was Collingwood, as suave as usual.

'I'm taking the opportunity of having a word with the man you sent here,' replied Biggles coldly.

'Oh, and what has he told you?'

'He advised us to go away —for the good of our health.'

'And very good advice, too. You would be wise to take it.'

'Did you send him here?'

'I did not.'

'Let's put it like this. *Why* did you send him ?'

'Must I repeat myself? I did not send him.'

'Are you saying he came here on his own account?'

'Apparently.'

'And you expect me to believe that ?'

'You can believe what you like. Frankly, I couldn't care less about what you believe.' To the Arab Collingwood said: 'Go home.'

'I do my best,' the Arab said, and walked away.

Biggles looked at Collingwood. 'Well, what else have you got to say ?'

'Nothing,' Collingwood answered imperturbably. 'Except perhaps this. You would do well to accept Ali's advice. He knows what he's talking about.' With this, he, too, walked away.

'What do you make of all that ?' asked Algy when he had gone.

'Don't ask me any more questions tonight,' pleaded Biggles. 'I'm tired of going round in circles. There is one thought that occurs to me. As an Arab, Ali will know all about *hashish*. He must have seen that crop of hemp. Has he something to do with that, I wonder?'

'He gave us what sounded like a fair enough warning to get out,' commented Algy.

'He was repeating what Collingwood had already told us. It all adds up to the same thing. We're not wanted here. We needn't look far for the reason. Someone is afraid we might spot the truth of what this is all about. The hemp, for instance. To grow the stuff is illegal.

Who would be likely to look for it in what would seem an ideal out-of-the-way spot like this ? All sorts of tricks have been tried to produce a small crop of hemp. One of them, in Egypt, was to plant some in the middle of a standard crop like wheat or maize, so that it couldn't be seen; but air photography put an end to that.'

'Why not ask Collingwood straight out if he has a permit to grow the stuff?'

'He might lie and say he had.'

'Ask him to produce it.'

'If he said he couldn't find it, *it* would put us on a spot. We wouldn't know what to do. I have a better idea than that.'

'What ?'

'Cut the bally stuff down.'

'That would be a bit hot; like taking the law into our own hands.'

'I don't see it like that. This is British Crown property. It is illegal to grow the drug *hashish*. We're police officers. If we found someone with *hashish* we'd seize it. We can't seize a whole crop, but we could do the next best thing, destroy it. There's a heavy knife in our crash kit which is just the job.'

Algy shrugged. 'Okay, if that's how you feel. But be prepared for Collingwood to go off at the deep end when he finds what you've done.'

'I shall do it tomorrow morning as soon as we've salvaged the anchor. We'd better keep guard tonight. We've been warned to prepare for trouble. I'm only surprised we were warned. We'd look silly if we woke up to find the machine on fire.'

'They might go farther,' Algy said seriously. 'It may have been a good thing I told Collingwood who we are,' went on Biggles. 'He must realize that, as we were sent here officially, if we fail to return home someone will be sent to find out why and I don't think that would suit him. That may have prevented him from doing anything drastic up to

now; but it might be better not to gamble that this will go on. Make no mistake, if we have a puzzle to sort out, so has he. I'd bet he's doing some serious thinking at this moment — as we are. In case he should try to spring a surprise we'll take four hour stretches to keep awake. You pick your own time. It's all the same to me.'

CHAPTER 9

HEAVY WEATHER AHEAD

THE night passed without incident, so the situation remained unchanged. Dawn broke over the Indian Ocean with the promise of another fine day; but there was a curious crimson tint in the sky which Biggles regarded with suspicion. 'There's a change coming; I can feel it in my bones,' he said to Algy as they made a quick breakfast. 'The breakers on the other side of the island have changed their note. They're really growling. That usually means something—a change somewhere, if not here. It may not affect us, but we'd better get cracking and pull our mudhook up for a start. I don't like to think of what could happen to the island if a typhoon struck it, lying low in the water as it does with practically no natural protection. Captain Grant, the skipper who put Bonney on the map, realized that and noted it in his log.'

'Do you still intend to do what you decided on last night; knock off that hemp ?' inquired Algy .

'Yes. That should bring matters to a head. We can't sit around here indefinitely waiting for Collingwood to show his hand.'

'He's going to be more than somewhat peeved when he sees what you've done.'

'That's the idea. If he flies off the handle it will be as good as saying he planted the stuff; and that will be an admission that he's involved in a drug racket.'

In the event, the recovery of the anchor proved to be a simple operation. At any rate, Biggles made it appear simple. The engines were started and the aircraft was soon back on the lagoon. The lifebelt that acted as a marker, the only conspicuous object on the calm water, could be seen from a distance, so Biggles was able to taxi straight to it. 'You keep an eye open for anything looking like a shark,' he told Algy. 'If the brute is about he should show us his dorsal.'

'What about Collingwood ?'

'What about him ?'

'He'll hear the engines and come to see what we're doing.'

'So what? That doesn't worry me. Anyhow, he must have realized by now that we're not to be fooled by this Robinson Crusoe lark. At the moment that confounded shark could make things more difficult than anything he can do.'

The marker buoy was reached without any sign of the shark, as

probably would have been the case had it been near. 'It's realized there's more room in the open sea,' Biggles said, as he reached out for the lifebelt and pulled the line taut. He pulled until the aircraft was directly above the anchor, but it would not move. He then tried pulling from different directions, but with no more success.

'What are you going to do ?' Algy asked, with a note of alarm in his voice as Biggles began throwing off the few garments he was wearing.

'I'm going down to unhook it,' Biggles answered. 'Otherwise we might be fiddling about here all day. You hang on to the line to keep the machine steady .' After a final survey of the water around he filled his lungs, slid overboard and swam down. Inside a minute he was clambering back into the machine. 'Okay,' he said, shaking the water from his hair. 'That was the easiest way. One of the flukes was hooked under a lump of coral and we might have hauled till we were blue in the face without clearing it.'

'It might have been the easiest way, as it turned out, but it was taking a chance,' Algy said severely.

'It's ten to one the shark you saw wasn't a man-eater anyway,' replied Biggles casually, as he sat in the sun to dry while Algy pulled the anchor aboard and stowed it in its usual place. 'You can take her back to the beach now we've got that little operation buttoned up.'

Algy took the aircraft back to the little beach of white coral sand where it had spent the night. Biggles, now again in his clothes, went into the cabin and came out with the sharp, heavy knife, that was always carried as part of the gear for cutting out anyone who might be trapped in a crash landing, always a possibility when coming down on unknown ground outside an established aerodrome.

'Shall I keep the machine here?' asked Algy, as Biggles, knife in hand, prepared to move off.

'I think you might as well,' decided Biggles. 'You should be: more comfortable here than afloat; able to stretch your legs. I doubt if Collingwood will interfere with you.' As an afterthought he added with a grin: 'If he should come down you can tell him what I'm doing. That should rock him on his heels.'

'How long do you reckon to be away?' Biggles thought for a moment. 'Not more than three hours; probably less. You'd better peg her down if it should start to blow. The tackle's inside. Anyhow, I shall be back hotfoot at the first sign of a storm coming this way. You might have a nice hot meal ready,' he concluded. cheerfully. 'I'm getting a bit tired of hard tack.'

Algy smiled. 'What do you fancy ?'

'Fish and chips. There are plenty of little fishes in the lagoon.'

You've got some hooks and a line.'

'I'll have a go at 'em. What do I use for chips ?' 'Collingwood may have some spuds in his vegetable patch. If you see him he may let you have a few.' With a parting wave Biggles set off.

He took the same route along the shore as on the previous clay. He did not expect trouble, but he thought he might run into Ali who would probably object to seeing the hemp crop destroyed; but he did not think he would offer physical resistance. If that should happen he was confident of being able to deal with him. He was more concerned with the weather and looked often at the sky, which now had taken on a dull greyish look through which the sun could only peer with a bleary eye. He could hear breakers thundering on the exposed beach. It was evident that the weather was deteriorating and he could only hope that it would not get worse. It might, he thought, be the result of a distant storm.

In due course he reached the hollow where the digging was going on. He stopped and looked, but he could not see the Arab. Nor could he hear him working, so, hurrying now, he went to the hemp plantation.

Ali was there. Busy. Biggles, his arrival unnoticed, stopped to watch, trying to make out what he was doing. Actually, he could see plainly enough what he was doing, but could not understand the purpose. At first it seemed that his own plan had been anticipated and the Arab was bent on the destruction of the plantation. He was , walking about in it pulling plants out by the roots and throwing them aside to die in the sun. But why only some ? Why not all ? What was the idea of that ? It seemed a strange business. If he was trying to dispose of the forbidden plants, why go about it in such a haphazard manner? Was it because the crop was too thick and he was thinning them out? Had some of the plants been stricken by a disease and he was weeding out those affected?

Biggles sat down to watch, trying to work out the reason for the curious operation now in progress. He knew as much, if not more, than the average man about Indian hemp and the drug produced from it; but he did not know everything. There was still something in the way *hashish* was procured that he did not know or he would have known exactly what Ali was doing. As it was, he could only wonder. However, one thing was clear. The Arab knew all about the hemp being grown on the island. Was he now clearing it by Collingwood's orders?

Biggles did not reveal himself. He saw Ali finish his task and stand back to survey the result of his labour . Then, as if satisfied, he went off in the direction of the runway, probably, Biggles thought, to report

to Collingwood. To save any argument he sank down out of sight until he had gone.

Then, after another look at the sky he moved on quickly to do what he had come to do. He worked fast after having been delayed, for the coconuts were now threshing their fronds, and beyond them he could see the spray of the giant waves that were hurling themselves on the exposed beach. With his knife he slashed off close to the ground the plants the Arab had not touched. No effort was required. The plants were green and lush, and one swipe was usually enough. The whole business did not occupy more than twenty minutes, and by the time he had finished the entire plantation had been laid low. The place looked like an autumn harvest field.

He did not tarry on the spot. The weather was now rapidly getting worse, and it was with more than a little anxiety that he began his return journey to the lagoon. Indeed, he was beginning to blame himself for having left Algy alone to manage the aircraft, and he had no hesitation in taking the shortest way to it, which was along the old landing strip. He didn't care now if Collingwood did see him. His drug farm had gone and nothing he could do would restore it.

As he passed the hollow the Arab suddenly appeared out of it, and, of course, saw him. He seemed surprised, but he salaamed, and looking at the knife Biggles still carried asked him what he had been doing at that end of the island. Was it coconuts he wanted? Seeing no reason to prevaricate, Biggles told him the truth, and what he thought about hemp, in a few curt words.

The result startled him. For a moment Ali stared at him in dumb surprise, lower jaw sagging, and in his eyes that glazed, faraway look, which in some natives can come with shock or lack of comprehension. When he did understand what had happened his expression flashed to one of fierce hostility. His hand went to the dagger that hung in a scabbard from his waist in such a way that Biggles took a quick step back thinking he was about to be attacked. Instead, with a cry like that of a stricken animal he threw his hands towards heaven and rushed off towards the plantation, screaming about Allah and forgiveness.

Biggles shrugged. Astonished, he went on his way, breaking into a run when he reached the higher ground and felt the full force of the wind. The sky was now an evil leaden colour, dull crimson where the sun was behind the murk. The sea was in a turmoil with great waves not only breaking on the reef but flooding into the lagoon with clouds of flying spray. There was no longer any doubt about it. A violent storm, if not a hurricane, was blowing up, and it looked as if the island lay directly in its path, in which case it would feel the full force

of it. Far out to sea, through mist and flying spray, he noticed a ship, an Arab *dhow*, dropping its huge lateen sail and making heavy weather of it as it ran before the storm.

When he came to within sight of the machine he was not surprised to see Algy working on it in feverish haste, driving in pegs to which cords could be attached to hold it down. What did amaze him was to see Collingwood there, apparently helping him. What, he wondered, could have brought about such a change of face?

When Biggles ran up he was faced by Collingwood, legs apart, leaning against the wind.

'Where: the devil have you been?' shouted Collingwood.

'Couldn't: you see what was happening?'

Biggles looked at Algy. 'Haven't you told him?'

'No. I've been too busy.'

Biggles turned back to Collingwood. 'I've been to cut down that field of hemp.'

Collingwood changed colour. He seemed to stagger. 'And have you?'

'I have.'

'You fool. You idiot. You damned imbecile,' snarled Collingwood. 'You interfering lunatic. That's done it. Now they *will* kill you. I don't care about that, but I shall probably get my throat cut at the same time.'

'What are you talking about?' demanded Biggles, taken aback by this outburst. 'Who's going to do this throat-cutting?'

'They will.' Collingwood pointed at the Arab *dhow*, now in the distance, running before the gale.

'What have they got to do with it?' questioned Biggles, with a rising note of incomprehension in his voice.

'That hemp was theirs.'

Biggles stared. 'You're joking.'

'When those Arabs come back you'll find it's no joke,' declared Collingwood grimly.

'How was I to know? I assumed it was yours.'

'Mine! What would I want with *hashish*? Do you think I'm crazy?'

'I was in some doubt about your sanity in parking yourself in a place like this. When I found the hemp I thought that was the answer.'

Algy broke in, shouting: 'Stop arguing the toss, you two, and give me a hand.'

The others went to his assistance, filling sandbags to hang on the

wings. Collingwood went on talking. 'You realize we're in for a typhoon, and a snorter at that if I know anything ?'

'I'm not blind,' growled Biggles.

'It's lucky for you.'

'How do you work that out ?'

'That *dhow* was coming here. But for the gale it would have been in the lagoon by now. They wouldn't be so mad as to risk trying to get through the narrow entrance in these conditions. But don't fool yourself they've gone. They'll be back, and when they see what you've done you'll be for it. They're an ugly lot. Why didn't you go when I warned you? Now you'll be lucky to get away at all. I imagine you won't try to take off in this!'

Biggles glanced at the lagoon, storm-tossed, with waves pouring into it. 'I'm not *that* crazy,' he retorted.

'Then you'd better start praying, because if we're in the path of what's coming, there won't be much left of your machine by the time it's gone.'

They were still working desperately. Biggles knew Collingwood was telling the simple truth. He knew what could happen, having once seen a *Moth* that had been forced down by the weight of water and hailstones trying to get home through a monsoon storm. When all the materials available had been brought into use he said: 'That's about all we can do. Now she'll have to take her luck.'

'What are you going to do ?' asked Collingwood. 'Stay here, I suppose.'

'As you wish, but you won't be able to do anything. I'll see you have a Christian funeral. This storm is only on half throttle yet.'

'We may not get any hail.'

'If we do it'll be lumps of ice the size of hen's eggs. Driven by a hundred and fifty mile an hour wind they'll go through you like bullets. If they'll go through the sheet-iron top of a Nissen hut, and they have, you can imagine what they'll do to this machine. The cabin won't be any protection. Even if the plane isn't washed away, as could happen, it'd be no more use than tissue paper.'

'What else can we do?'

'You'd stand a better chance in my hut.'

Biggles looked at Algy, clinging to the quivering aircraft, who had been listening to the conversation. 'What about it ?'

'I'm for the hut,' Algy yelled. 'If we can't save the machine it might save us. There's nothing we can do here.'

'Then let's see if we can get to it,' Collingwood bawled, for the noise

of the wind and the thunder of waves on the reef made ordinary conversation futile. The sky was now deep indigo, but so far there had been no rain or hail.

They set off for the hut.

CHAPTER 10

COLLINGWOOD TALKS

TOPPING the rise they were nearly swept off their feet by the wind and they were able to realize the full fury of it; and it was only by fighting their way through it that they managed to reach the hut occupied by Collingwood. Breathless and exhausted they staggered in. Collingwood shut and fastened the door. Pointing to some empty boxes he said: 'Take a seat.'

There was less noise inside the hut but still enough to make ordinary conversation difficult. They had to raise their voices to be heard. Biggles lit a cigarette. To Collingwood he said: 'You say you don't use *hashish*!'

'That's; what I said.'

'Then how does it happen I could smell it the last time I was in here. When I saw the hemp growing I remembered what it was.'

Collingwood smiled mirthlessly. 'There was a reason for that.'

'Could there be one ?'

'Ever had a toothache ?'

'I have.'

'Then :you know what it's like. A tooth started playing me up soon after I got here. I had brought some painkilling pills with me for an emergency, but they didn't give me much relief. I couldn't get any sleep. I'd seen the hemp growing. I tried smoking some. Finally, in desperation, I chewed a piece. Ever eaten *hashish*?'

'Never.'

'Don't. Ali gave me a piece.'

'Is he an addict ?'

'I don't know if he's an addict, but most Arabs use the infernal stuff if they can get it.'

'Was it as bad as that ?'

'It was hell. I only took a piece the size of a pea. I can't tell you what it was like. I became a sort of spirit looking at my dead body lying on the bed. I thought I was going to die. Ali found me like that

and gave me a dose of black coffee. Then I was as sick as a dog.'

'Did it cure the toothache ?' Algy asked.

'More or less. But it left me with something worse. My head felt as if all the hammers of hell were thumping inside it. I was days getting back to normal. Why anyone should use the stuff twice is beyond me. I can only suppose that like tobacco sickness one gets over it. But no more for me. It has a smell that clings and I've never quite been able to get rid of it.'

'That's how Customs men are able to find it when a smuggler tries to carry some,' Biggles said. 'Which reminds me. When I got to the hemp your Arab pal was there, and as far as I could make out was trying to get rid of the crop by pulling it up by the roots.'

'He wasn't destroying it. He was making sure of getting some *hashish*.'

'Seems a funny way to get it.'

'Apparently you don't understand how *hashish* is procured.'

'All I've seen is the finished product.'

'What you saw Ali doing was what he was left here to do. He was uprooting all the male plants. That's the only way to get the drug. When I came here I knew nothing about *hashish*. What I've learned since was through Ali. What happens is this. Only the female plants produce the drug and even they won't do it if there are any male plants near. With no males in the vicinity the females throw a sort of film on the upper surfaces of their leaves.' Collingwood smiled. 'Break out into a kind of sweat, so to speak. Anyhow, that's the actual opiate. Without it the stuff is no use. Now you know what Ali was doing when you saw him. The crop had been grown from seed and he was chucking out the male plants.'

'This is news to me,' Biggles said. 'We live and learn,' he added tritely.

'Glad to have been able to teach you something,' Collingwood said with a faint sneer. 'Now you know why, when that *dhow* comes back, the crew will take a poor view of what you've done when they see the entire crop has gone.'

'The *dhow* may not come back.'

'Why shouldn't it ?'

'It may go down in the storm.'

'If that's what you're hoping you can forget it. These

Arab *dhow*s are some of the most seaworthy craft that ever sailed salt water. Their design hasn't changed in over a thousand years. And their crews know how to handle them. Wonderful sailors. The weather

doesn't worry them. They've been trading between their home ports on the coast of Southern Arabia, and India, Ceylon, and as far afield as Rangoon and Singapore, since biblical days. And they don't need instruments to find their way. As long as they can see the stars they'll get there. Oh yes, they'll be back to collect their *hashish*, have no doubt of that. It's worth more than a load of fish, hides or coconut fibre, which is usually the official cargo.'

'What about Ali ?' asked Biggles. 'How will he manage during the storm ?'

'Oh he'll be all right.'

'By taking cover in the cave, I suppose.' Collingwood's eyebrows went up. 'So you've found that, too. You *have* been busy.'

'I've had a look round,' admitted Biggles. 'That's why I was sent here. What are you digging for? You might as well tell us because sooner or later we shall find out. You've told us so much, you might as well tell us the rest. It could save both of us a lot of trouble. If we can see eye to eye it should be to our mutual advantage.'

'As we're all likely to get our throats cut when the Arabs get here, and there are between twenty and thirty on board that *dhow*, perhaps you're right,' conceded Collingwood. 'We should do better to stick together.'

'I don't see why they should kill you because of something we did,' put in Algy.

'They won't stop to argue about that. They'll be so mad they'll probably murder Ali, too, for failing to protect the hemp. All right. I'll make some coffee and tell you the whole story,' agreed Collingwood. 'We can't do anything until this storm blows itself out, anyway. I can only hope we're not blown out with it. These huts have taken a fair battering over the years and they're getting a bit shaky.'

He lit ~1 Primus stove, put the kettle on and produced three cups and saucers.

'Nice to see saucers again,' Algy said. 'We dispense with such unnecessary luxuries when long-distance flying.'

'I try to keep civilized,' returned Collingwood, as he made the coffee and handed it round. Resuming his seat he went on: 'I was going to tell you how all this started. I'll begin at the beginning. I was born in Australia. Were you ever there?'

'Yes.'

'What part?'

'Western Australia.'

'Then I don't suppose you would have heard of a place called

Cooper Pedy. In Australian that means manhole.'

'No.'

'It's in South Australia. No matter. It isn't important. When I was a boy my father took a long trip, in a truck, across the desert to see a relation who was raising stock in the north. He took me with him to show me the country. On the way we passed Cooper Pedy. In fact, we stayed the night there. Although I didn't know it, that was to change my life. I must tell you that Cooper Pedy isn't a town, or it wasn't in my time. It was not much more than a sandstone hill, miles from anywhere, in which men called gougers dig holes in the ground looking for opal. Some of them lived in the holes they dug. Do you know anything about opal?'

'Very little, except that it's a curious kind of precious stone.'

'Then I shall have to tell you, so that you'll be able to understand the rest of the story, which ends with me being here. Opal is valuable, but it isn't popular because it's supposed to bring bad luck. I don't know why, or how, such a rumour ever started.'

'Perhaps you're about to find out if it's true,' suggested Biggles, with a faint smile.

'We shall see. Now about opal. To me, and a lot of other people, it's the most beautiful thing the earth produces. You can have your diamonds, rubies and emeralds. It's not only the most fascinating, it's also the most exasperating. There's nothing logical about it, no natural law. There are no veins or seams to follow, as with most minerals. Either it's there, or it isn't. As the gougers say, "where it is, there it is". You just dig and trust to luck. One man may dig for a year where opal is known to exist and find nothing. A man two or three yards away from him might turn up a thousand pounds' worth in ten minutes, or five thousand pounds' worth in a week.'

'What makes it precious?' asked Algy.

'The same thing as will make most things precious; rarity. Once it was found only in two or three places in the world. Any that came on the market was found chiefly in Mexico and Hungary. Then it was found in Australia; and Australian opal is the best. It varies a lot in appearance. It can be any colour, from black to white, but it's always translucent; or to use the correct word, opalescent. It all glows with the same living fire in its heart.'

'What is it actually made of?' asked Biggles.

'Many things can turn to opal. There's a variety called wood opal, which is wood turned to silica and still showing the grain. Ancient fossilized bones and shells can turn to opal. You may remember that when you first saw me I was working on a shell. I was scraping some

dirt off it. One has to be careful because opal breaks easily, which is why you seldom see a large piece without a flaw. I'll show you.'

Collingwood fetched what looked like a dirty piece of rubble and held it out for inspection. A small area that had been scraped revealed a glowing spark of crimson fire.

Algy pursed his lips in admiration.

'I see what you mean,' Biggles said. 'How much would that piece be worth?'

'I won't know until I've finished it and polished it. But don't run away with the idea that this is a matter of money. Gougers work for love of the stuff. They're entranced by its beauty. They may start with the idea of making money, but many of them end up with keeping what they find. They can't bear to part with it. It grows on you. In fact, you might say that opal gouging can become a disease. Once you've seen that flash of fire in the dark you're its slave for life.'

'Is that what happened to you?' asked Biggles.

'You could say that. When I was at Cooper Pedy a gouger gave me a little piece for luck, and from that moment — I was only a kid at the time — my one ambition in life was to become a gouger. But it didn't work out like that. My father had different ideas. I was sent to school in England and that seemed to be the end of my ambition. But I didn't forget it. Seldom would a day pass without me taking out my little piece of opal and having a quiet gloat over it.'

'I'm beginning to understand the fascination,' Biggles said.

Collingwood continued. 'Then came the war. Naturally, I joined up and chose the RAF. I got my ticket on heavy bombers. Coming back from a raid badly shot up I had to make a crash landing. That put me in hospital and left me with some heart trouble. However, when I was convalescent they found me a light job. It was here.'

'You must have thought there was something in the reputation opal has for bad luck,' suggested Biggles.

'Don't jump to conclusions,' Collingwood answered. 'Wait till I've finished. I was sent here, to Bonney Island, as officer in charge of a care and maintenance party consisting of a storekeeper, a cook, two radio operator mechanics and four fitter-riggers. We were flown out with a hefty load of stores in old Southampton flying-boats, landing on the lagoon. Another flying-boat brought a dozen Arab labourers collected from goodness knows where — probably from Egypt or Aden — to clear some ground for a landing strip. When that had been done they were taken off and I was left alone with my party of irks.'

'I'd call that a slice of cake, well away from the war,' offered Biggles with a smile.

The smile faded when something struck the tin hut with a noise like a bullet. Came another, and then two or three more.

'Here it comes,' shouted Collingwood. 'You should have gone when I told you. There's nothing you can do about it now. When these lumps of ice have finished with your machine it'll look like a colander.'

'Had I gone when you told me, and I'd run into this, I should have been beaten down into the drink, which would have been worse,' reminded Biggles.

'Instead, you'll be stuck here to have your throats cut, which comes to the same thing in the end,' Collingwood said calmly.

With that there was a continuous crash on the roof as if it had come under the fire of a battery of machine guns. The noise was deafening. Conversation became impossible. Collingwood made signs that it was no use trying to go on. Algy winced and put his hands over his ears. Biggles lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER 11

COLLINGWOOD ENDS HIS TALE

IT was nearly half an hour before the conversation could be resumed. All noise ended abruptly. The sudden hush was almost frightening after the long continuous uproar.

'We are in the middle,' announced Collingwood. 'You can get this sort of calm in the centre of a cyclone. But it isn't finished yet. Nothing like it. Presently the other half will catch up with us and it'll start an over again, so we might as well talk while we can. When we were cut off I'd got as far as how I first came to Bonney Island. You seemed to think it was an fun and games. Up to a point it was, but it was pretty boring. There was so little to do. Machines didn't come in every day. Sometimes weeks would pass without us having a visitor, particularly during the monsoon period. When one did come in it seldom stayed more than half an hour; just long enough for a check and for the passengers to stretch their legs. Between times, as I couldn't find anything for my fellows to do, they spent most of their time playing cards. As for me, to pass the time I thoroughly explored the island, studying the natural history of the place —what little there was of it —collecting shells on the beach, and so on, with the idea of one day writing a book on life on a desert island.'

'But you didn't forget your passion for opal,' hinted Biggles, cheerfully.

'Actually, that was the last thing I thought about. I certainly didn't expect to find any here, and that's a fact. I certainly didn't go out of my way to look for it.'

'But I gather you found some.'

'Yes. It'; here. How it came to be here I wouldn't try to guess. I'll leave that to the scientific wizards to work out. I can only suppose that the island, being of volcanic origin, the opal was always where it is now when the whole mass was pushed up from the bottom of the sea by an earthquake, or something of that sort. The coral would come later, of course. Islands can appear like that, you know.'

'They still do,' Biggles said.

Collingwood resumed. 'Well, one day I was poking about in the hollow at the far end of the island when I picked up a piece of stuff that reminded me of the opal ore I'd seen at Cooper Pedy. You'll believe me when I say I couldn't believe my eyes. Now mark this. In all the RAP I was; probably the only man who knew anything at all about opal. It isn't everyone's cup of tea. Yet here I was, with a possibility of finding some. Extraordinary, wasn't it ? But life's like that. Million to one chances coming off to confound the mathematicians. Just now you were talking about my opal bringing me bad luck. It begins to look as if it brought me good luck, doesn't it?'

'This frolic isn't finished yet,' reminded Biggles. 'We shall see.'

'Anyway, you achieved your ambition and were able to do a spot of gouging,' Algy said.

'You bet I did. I was trembling with excitement. That's what opal can do to a man. I fetched a tool and started to drive a shaft into the steep side of the hollow. Within an hour I'd struck my first piece and picked it out from where it must have been lying for millions of years. A lovely piece of dark red fire opal. I took it to be a piece of fossilized bone, probably once part of some long extinct monster. Now I really had something to do. But I had to be careful not to let my lads see what was going on for fear they were smitten by opal fever, in which case I might have had no one on duty in the signals office. Well, that's how things were when the war ended. By that time I had found a few nice pieces, but mostly flawed. Then, like a bomb, it was all over. There was nothing I could do about it.'

'And your boys never suspected what you were doing?'

'Of course not. Why should they ? I don't suppose one of them had ever seen a piece of raw opal, and wouldn't recognize it for what it was if he did see it. They'd probably think it was just a pretty piece of stone. But I must press on before the other half of the cyclone hits us.'

An aircraft carrier came out to close down the station, collect the gear and take us home. I would rather have stayed here, but had I suggested it some smart psychiatrist would have declared I'd gone round the bend and I'd have been taken off, anyway, for observation — as they say. So home I went. A year later I was demobbed and I had no more chance of getting back to my opal mine than landing on the moon. Having no real money I had to take a job in England to keep myself.'

'Why didn't you tell the government what you'd found and apply for a concession to work your mine? They might have made you a grant of money.'

Collingwood's lips curled in a sneer. 'You're joking. You know, or should know, how government departments work. For months I'd have heard nothing; then, if I pestered them hard enough to make myself a nuisance, they might have told me that a committee of experts had been set up to investigate the claim, or something of that sort. I shouldn't have been in the picture, you can bet on that.'

'Even so they might have paid you a sum of money for the information you'd provided. They're not always ungenerous in that respect.'

'All some people think about is money,' scoffed Collingwood. 'You still haven't got the point. I wasn't after money. Can't you understand that? What I wanted was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream; to be a gouger, to dig my own opal. That gives some people, and that includes me, something money can't buy. Many prospectors are like that. It's doing what they want to do that makes life worth living. I had to nurse my ambition for years.'

'Sorry " Biggles said, contritely.

'About twelve months ago I had a stroke of luck, a real drop of gravy,' went on Collingwood. 'In the Aero Club I ran into a fellow, an ex-squadron leader type named Murdo Mackay, who had been one of the pilots on the wartime Bonney Island run. He was then a pilot working for Indian Airways, based on Calcutta. He told me he also had a private plane for his own use. He remembered me as being in charge of the party on Bonney Island. I told him that when I was there I'd discovered something valuable and was anxious to go back.'

'Did you tell him what it was?' 'Not likely. It wouldn't have been my secret any longer. One word would have started a rush for the island. I asked him if he'd fly me to Bonney. He didn't think much of the idea. I didn't suppose he'd jump at it. I fancy he thought I was daft. He took a lot of persuading, but in the end, by promising to give him half of anything I found, I talked him into it. He said that if I could make my own way to Calcutta he'd fly me across when he had his next leave. So

I dropped everything and raised enough money to get to India. Mackay was as good as his word and flew me here with as big a load of stores as his machine could carry.'

'Where did you land?' asked Biggles.

'On the old landing strip. There was nowhere else.'

'That was taking a chance.'

'We realized that, but we found a piece of clear ground and managed to get down without breaking anything. The old landing ground was in better condition than I expected it would be. Well, that was that. He went home and I was on my own, what you might call a willing Crusoe. He promised to come back when he had his next leave, which would be in about six months, to pick me up — if I was still alive.'

'Had he any reason to think you might not be alive?' 'He seemed to think I might go out of my mind and commit suicide. As I expect him here in a week or two, as near as I can judge not having counted the days, I've cleared any obstructions on the landing strip to be ready for him.'

'Did you do that on your own?'

'Not entirely. I had a helper. And that brings me to the next instalment of what must sound a fantastic yarn. 'I had only been here a month when I had visitors. An Arab *dhow* came along and put a party ashore by way of the reef. I went down to greet them and I could see by their faces that they weren't pleased to find me here. I never saw a more villainous-looking bunch of toughs. They went into a huddle to decide, as I learned later, how to get rid of me. Some were in favour of bumping me off then and there. One man saved me. He'd been one of the gang of labourers put ashore to clear the runway. Having come from Aden, he spoke English fairly well, so was able to act as an interpreter.'

'Ali?'

'That's the man. We talked things over. I told him that as far as I was concerned they could do what they liked. I wasn't interested and wouldn't interfere. Ali said all they wanted to do was raise a small crop of corn for use when they made the island a deep-sea fishing base. When he was working on the runway it seems he had noticed a good piece of ground. Of course, I had no idea of the sort of corn they had in mind; not that it would have made any difference if I had. I was only interested in opal.'

'They didn't tell you they were going to produce *hashish*?'

'No, and I can well understand that, because they were part of a big drug syndicate working in Egypt. As a matter of fact, at that time I

knew nothing whatever about Indian hemp and wouldn't have recognized it if I'd seen it. My instruction in that commodity came later, from Ali. To make a long story short we came to an understanding. I promised not to interfere with anything they did as long as they left me alone. That seemed fair enough. The next thing they did was blast a hole in the reef in order to get into the lagoon, which made it clear they intended to come here regularly. I thought that was going to a lot of trouble to grow a handful of corn. Obviously it couldn't be much because there wasn't enough suitable ground. Still I didn't suspect the truth. Why should I? Anyway, when they'd planted their crop they pushed off, leaving one man here to take care of it.'

'Ali?'

'Of course. I think he was chosen because he could speak English.'

'When did you realize what the stuff was?'

'One day when I was looking at the crop, then starting to grow, I asked Ali what it was. Perhaps because he knew I was alone and couldn't do anything about it, he told me frankly it was hemp for making hashish. I'd got to know him fairly well by that time. I told him to get on with it. It was of no interest to me. He could rely on me to say nothing about it even if I had an opportunity. After that we got quite pally and I suggested that as he hadn't much to do he might like to help me. I'd pay him. He agreed to give me a hand on the runway in return for an occasional tin of soup or corned beef, which to him were luxuries. That's how things were when you rolled up to upset our little apple cart. Perhaps you can now understand why I didn't exactly greet you with loud cries of joy.'

Biggles nodded. 'Pity. Had you told me this earlier it would have saved us both a lot of trouble. Not being interested in either hashish or opal, anyway, as far as the island is concerned, I would have respected your confidence and left you alone. As far as I can see you weren't doing any harm.'

'Well, by spoiling the hemp you've properly dropped a hammer in the works,' declared Collingwood. 'I'll do a deal with you. If you find the storm has put your machine out of action, and we can stave off these Arabs when they come back, when my pal Mackay comes for me I'll get him to take you as far as India.'

'What about you?'

'I shall stay here. I'm happy, and I haven't finished yet.'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'I shall have to think about your proposition. I may need your help. I wasn't such a fool as to park myself on a spot like this without a lifeline. I, too, have made arrangements, in case of accident, to be picked up.'

'I see. Please yourself.'

'Tell me this,' requested Biggles. 'Have you found any opal ?'

Collingwood's answer was to move some stores and produce a small, flat wooden box, about twelve inches by six and two inches deep. He opened it to show it was lined with black velvet. And that was not all. On the velvet, carefully arranged, was what seemed to be a mass of glowing iridescent fire, ever changing colour as waves of light ran across it. Algy gasped.

'Lovely,' breathed Biggles. 'What are you going to do with it ?'

'Give Mackay his share and keep the rest, of course.' At that moment a gust of wind struck the hut with enough force to make it shake. An instant later came the rattle and crash of hailstones.

'Here we go again,' shouted Collingwood, closing his box of treasures. 'Last lap.'

'How long will it last ?' yelled Biggles.

'A few hours; maybe two or three days,' answered Collingwood.

CHAPTER 12

PLANS AND SPECULATION

AS it turned out, the storm, typhoon, tornado, cyclone, hurricane — called by any name it is much the same thing

— lasted only a matter of a few hours; which was long enough for the three men in the hut. The hail ended like a tap turned off, although it continued to rain. But the wind abated slowly. For some time it continued to blow a full gale before beginning gradually to ease off. The tearing gusts became less frequent. Between them conversation again became possible.

After a while Collingwood opened the door to inspect conditions outside. They all looked out. The sea was a terrifying spectacle. Mountains of waves, their crests lost in a world of flying spray as the wind tore at them. Waves were sweeping over the top of the reef and flooding into the lagoon, making it nearly as turbulent as the open sea. Had the Gadfly been on it, it could hardly have survived such a battering. Algy, looking aghast at the picture, could only imagine what the exposed side of the island was like. There was no sign of the *dhow*., but visibility was reduced by the rain.

'What a sailor's nightmare,' observed Biggles, gazing at the scene. 'There's nothing much we can do until the rain lets up a bit, and we can get to the machine to see how much damage has been done; so we

might as well decide what we're going to do, and say, when the *hashish* pedlars arrive. Even if the *dhow* weathers the storm I can't see it trying to get into the lagoon, or land anywhere else, till the sea goes down. Which reminds me. What about Ali? How has he fared in all this, I wonder? As soon as we can get out we'd better go along to find out. He may have an idea.'

'What about?' asked Collingwood. 'The hemp. He knows I cut it. I told him.'

'That's a pity. We might have blamed the damage on the storm. Or we might tell him that you saw him pulling up the plants and thought you were helping him.' Collingwood went on. 'He'll be all right. I imagine he would have gone into the hollow out of the wind, or even into the mine to dodge the hail.'

Biggles considered the sky. It was still dark, with low, racing clouds, but beginning to brighten. 'I'm going down to have a look at the machine,' he decided. 'That's the most important thing.'

'I'll come with you,' Collingwood said.

Disregarding the rain they made their way down to the little beach of coral sand where the Gadfly was straining at the pegs that secured her. They might have been just in time to save her from becoming a total wreck, for foam from the lagoon was washing over the pegs, loosening some of them and allowing her to tilt until one wing tip was nearly touching the sand. 'We'd better put that right for a start,' Biggles said. From the cabin he fetched the mallet carried for the purpose and drove the pegs home. 'We can't expect pegs to hold in wet sand; but the wind seems to be dropping, so they may last as long as they're needed. The overall damage isn't as bad as I expected,' he concluded, standing back better to survey the mischief.

The hull was only scratched and dented, but with the plane surfaces, the wings and elevators, it was a different story. They looked as if they had been under fire from shrapnel, which in a way they had. There were many holes, large and small, in the fabric; and some nasty jagged tears. Hailstones meeting with no obstruction had apparently gone clean through the wings.

'I wouldn't care to fly her in that condition,' Collingwood said. 'Some of those holes are big enough to let the air in, in which case the wing might balloon and rip the whole covering to rags.'

Biggles agreed. 'We've got materials for patching; we always carry some on trips of this nature; but it'll take time to tidy up this mess. Anyhow, it would be no use trying to do it in this wind or while it's raining. We should be able to fix her up, at least, well enough to get as far as India, where we could get the job done properly. We shall see. It's no use starting on her in this weather. It looks as if everything will

depend on how long that *dhow* will take to get back- if she's coming. She may have to go to her home port for repairs after what she's been through.'

'I wouldn't count on that,' returned Collingwood soberly. 'You'd be surprised what these Arab deep-sea sailors can do.'

'I don't see anything of her.' Biggles scanned the horizon.

'No doubt she'd run a long way before the wind.' Algy came in. He pointed. 'What's that thing over there?' He was looking at a dark mass that had been cast ashore at the far end of the beach, where the reef connected with the island.

They walked on until they were close enough to see the answer. It was the remains of a giant squid. A great bloated body and a tangle of tentacles.

'What a horror,' muttered Algy.

'If it isn't your little friend the decapod,' Biggles told Collingwood sarcastically. 'It appears to be dead. It's well out of the way. We've enough troubles without that. Either I killed it or made it too sick to stick in its hole, or wherever it lived, when the storm blew up.' 'The gulls will soon finish what's left of it,' stated Collingwood. 'I shan't be sorry to see it go.'

'You knew it was there,' accused Biggles.

'I saw it occasionally, crawling along the reef,' admitted Collingwood. 'I kept out of its way. It didn't add to the attractions of the lagoon as a swimming bath.'

'It wasn't exactly friendly of you not to warn us,' replied Biggles coldly.

'Why should I bother? You were nothing to do with me. In fact, you looked like being a nuisance.' Collingwood, with good reason, changed the subject. Looking at the sky he said: 'The worst seems to be over.'

It'll soon be getting dark, so I'll walk along to see how Ali has managed during the storm. It'll be interesting to have his reactions to your vandalism. He'll be savage; we can be sure of that. It'll put him on a spot, as well as us, for allowing it to happen. I'd have thought he'd be along here by now.'

'If you don't mind I'll come with you,' stated Biggles. 'If there's any unpleasant music to be faced I prefer to meet it and get it over with right away.'

They all went up to the landing strip as the easiest way of getting to the far end of the island. The cyclone had left its mark. The runway was littered with debris, torn palm fronds and the like.

'Looks as if I shall have some tidying up to do before my relief

plane can land,' remarked Collingwood lugubriously.

'We'll give you a hand,' offered Biggles. 'We might need it as well as you.'

In due course they arrived at the hollow. They could not see Ali, but they could see, and hear, the tremendous waves breaking on the exposed tip of the island. Some of the coconut palms had gone, apparently brought down by the wind.

'He may be shedding tears over his crop of hashish,' Biggles said as they walked on to the piece of ground that had been cultivated. 'The storm wouldn't have done it any good, anyway. It would have been flattened, if not blown away.'

Ali was not there. Nor was there any hemp, cut or standing, the wind, presumably, having scattered it far and wide. A few ragged leaves had been caught in some shrubs.

'He must have taken shelter in the mine,' speculated Collingwood.

They retraced their steps and went down into the hollow. As Ali was not in sight Collingwood hailed; but there was no reply. He pushed his way through the scrub to the entrance of the excavation. A shout of alarm took Biggles and Algy to the spot. There was no need to ask what was wrong. There was no shaft. No hole. It was plain that the bank had become a landslide and covered it.

'If he was inside when that happened, he'll have had his chips, poor devil,' Collingwood said.

'Not necessarily,' disputed Biggles. 'There would be enough air in the shaft to keep him alive for some time, provided the whole thing hasn't caved in and smothered him.'

'It must have been the rain,' surmised Collingwood. 'When the soil got wet it must have slid down like a load of mud.'

'Thank your lucky stars you weren't inside,' rejoined Biggles. 'But instead of standing here nattering, let's do something about it. We should be able to shift this muck provided there isn't too much of it. Let's pray the wretched fellow is alive. We shall need him.' =

'Why ?'

'If he's the only one of the gang who can speak English, we shall want an interpreter to do the parleying when the *dhow* comes back.'

Stooping, he picked up the entrenching tool that had been left there. It was half buried, but luckily the end of the handle was left exposed. There was something else. Biggles picked it up at the same time and held it out in the palm of his hand. It was an oval-shaped piece of pale cream, almost white, substance, across which flowed, like liquid, waves of all the hues of the rainbow.

'Opal,' cried Collingwood. 'You're in luck. I was gouging too low. It must have come from a higher level. I'll polish it for you.'

'Why for me ? It's your mine. I'm not a claim jumper.'

'You can keep it for a souvenir.'

'Thanks; but so far I've seen nothing here I'm particularly anxious to remember. But this is no time to talk about souvenirs,' went on Biggles tersely, tossing the opal to Collingwood. 'There's a man inside. Let's get him out.'

They went to work, Biggles with the tool, the others using their hands to pull away the sandy rock and dirt as he loosened it. 'That's enough of that,' Biggles told Collingwood, curtly, noticing he was allowing the debris to run through his fingers, apparently hoping to find more opal. 'You'll have time for that later.'

After ten minutes of feverish work another landslide exposed a small black hole the size of a rabbit burrow. Biggles enlarged it and putting his mouth close called 'Ali ! Are you in there ?'

A shaky voice answered.

The rest was comparatively easy. The sides of the aperture were torn away to enlarge the hole. Ali put his hands through. They were seized and he was dragged out bodily.

'Allah is merciful,' he panted, picking himself up and brushing dirt from his *gumbaz*, although it was soaking wet and sticking to his body. 'You came,' he croaked. 'It was the will of God.'

'It was the will of God that you were buried,' stated Collingwood, cynically. 'We got you out.'

Ali glared. 'God is the knower,' he declared. 'Let's not argue about that,' put in Biggles tersely. 'What happened?'

'When the ice falls it is much pain,' said Ali. 'I am in much grief. I come in the cave. The waves make the ground shake. Then the ground falls and I am inside.' The look the Arab gave Biggles, as if he had suddenly remembered what he had done to the hemp, was anything but friendly. 'My friends will kill you when they come,' he concluded calmly. 'They will probably kill you, too,' announced Collingwood cheerfully. 'We will talk about it. Are you coming with us to the huts ?'

'I stay here,' decided Ali. 'He's got a palm leaf shelter somewhere,' Collingwood told Biggles. 'Let him please himself. I suppose he thinks that if his pals arrive and find him with us they might suppose he agreed to the destruction of the hemp. We can talk to him tomorrow. I don't know about you, but I'm going to press on home before it gets dark.'

'If you have no objection we'll come with you,' Biggles said. 'We

have a few things to talk about and there's no time today to start work on the machine.'

'That's all right with me.'

'Good. I'll call at the machine to collect something to eat. After all this sweat I need food and I don't see why we should use yours.'

'As you like,' answered Collingwood. 'Will you answer me a straight question?'

'Try it.'

'If by some lucky chance you get back to England, are you going to report what I'm doing here?'

'I'm keeping an open mind about that,' replied Biggles. 'Strictly speaking, I should, but there are occasions when, having an educated conscience, I report only as much as I think is necessary. I should of course have to say I found a man living on the island, but I might feel under no compulsion to volunteer any information about what he was doing. And I can't imagine anyone guessing that he was gouging for opal. But we can talk about this later.'

They had started walking, but a call from Ali took Collingwood back to him. He was away a few minutes, the others waiting. When he came back Biggles asked, casually: 'What was all that about?'

'Ali had a suggestion to make.'

'Something interesting?'

'You should find it so, definitely.'

'What was the idea?'

'Perfectly simple. He proposed that while you were asleep we should kill you both. That would save any argument when his friends come back.'

'Charming,' murmured Algy, with biting sarcasm. 'What were your reactions to this delightful proposition?' inquired Biggles, calmly.

'I said I thought it was a good idea, but there were certain objections to it which I thought he should know,' answered Collingwood, casually. 'I promised to explain them tomorrow.'

'You might explain them to me at the same time,' requested Biggles. 'When is your pal Mackay due to arrive?'

'I can't say exactly. We couldn't fix a date because it could only be when he is on leave, or, as occasionally happens, when he isn't on the duty roster for one of the regular services. It had more or less to be left open. He'll come when he can. What about your relief plane?'

'Our arrangement was it should come to look for us if we weren't back in a week, or no message was received in that time. So far we've only been away, all told, five days, so the plane won't even start for

another two days. The earliest I could expect it would be five days from now.'

'That might be too late.'

'Perhaps. But there's nothing I can do about it.'

They walked on with the weather slowly improving, although the sea was just as rough, and could be expected to remain so for a few days after the shaking up it had been through. Just before they reached the huts Collingwood called attention to a solitary spark of light that had appeared far out to sea.

'That could be the *dhow* now, on its way back,' he observed.

'With the sea in the state it is, I can't see it trying to put anyone ashore,' Biggles said.

'Then let's hope, for your sake, that it stays rough,' returned Collingwood, meaningly. 'Are you going to sleep in my hut tonight?'

'No thanks. I'd rather stay with my machine in case of accidents. We shall be reasonably comfortable in the cabin. I'll slip down and collect one or two cans of food and join you later.'

He went off at a tangent.

CHAPTER 13

MURDER MOST FOUL

TAKING it on the whole, Biggles and Algy spent a quiet night in the cabin of the *Gadfly*, although their rest was broken by guard duty, which Biggles thought advisable.

There had been a lot of talk overnight in Collingwood's hut, but no definite plan to deal with the situation had been evolved. It was hard to see how there could be one until Ali had declared what he intended to do when his associates in the drug business arrived. Biggles was surprised that the Arab had elected to stay at his own end of the island instead of coming with them to the huts and wondered if there was some sinister reason for it. However, as he remarked, the brain of an Arab worked in its own peculiar way and few Europeans have been able to see inside it. Collingwood was of the opinion that he would join them in the morning when he had had time to think the situation over and note the position of the *dhow*. That was how matters had been left when Biggles and Algy had said good night to Collingwood and retired to the plane.

The morning came clear and fine with the sky its usual perfect blue; but the sea was still very rough. Even the lagoon was still

agitated and could be expected to remain so for a time. There was one blot on an otherwise attractive picture. The *dhow*. It was far away, but its big three-cornered lateen sail was set and it was standing toward the island. How long it would take to reach it was a matter of surmise. Certainly some hours, Biggles thought.

The gulls had discovered the dead decapod and, as is the manner of sea birds, were making a lot of noise, fighting and squabbling, as they made a meal of it.

Biggles and Algy had a quick breakfast, for as Biggles observed, conditions were ideal for the work they had to do. The sun and the breeze would quickly dry the patches they would have to put on. Fabric, dope and scissors were produced, and they were soon at work, Algy cutting the material and Biggles putting it on where it was needed. Little time was wasted in unnecessary conversation. Both realized that while they could not hope to get the machine airworthy before the *dhow* arrived, they should be able to get somewhere near it. There was nothing else they could do.

Once Biggles said he thought it would still be some time before the *dhow* would attempt a landing with such a heavy sea running. It would hardly dare to risk the narrow passage into the lagoon, anyway, for waves were still pouring through it, causing a dangerous swell. Meanwhile, the ungainly-looking vessel drew steadily nearer.

'They must be wondering what to make of us,' Biggles said. 'They must certainly be able to see us.'

On another occasion, as they worked on, Algy said: 'I wonder what Collingwood is up to. I would have thought he'd have been along by now to see how we are doing. He must have seen the *dhow* coming.'

'Probably playing with his opals,' returned Biggles, casually. 'He's got opals on the brain. When a man gets in that state about something, anything, it becomes a mania. He may be polishing the piece I found yesterday, as he said he would. He'll be along presently to show what a lovely thing he's made of it. Or, of course, he may have gone along to argue with Ali about what he's going to do when his pals manage to get ashore.'

Biggles spoke inconsequentially, for as yet there had been no indication of the drama the day was to provide. He did not stop work except to glance up from time to time to see how much progress the *dhow* had made.

'Collingwood didn't go to see Ali,' Algy said. 'There's Ali now, on the end of the reef, watching to see what his chums are going to do.'

Biggles paused to look. He then switched his gaze to the *dhow*, now close, with its single sail half furled. 'The question is, what is the *dhow*

going to do ?' he said with a worried frown.

'It looks as if they're lowering a boat,' observed Algy, looking equally anxious.

'I didn't reckon on that,' replied Biggles.

'Surely they won't try to put a small boat through the gap in the reef! The water's running like a mill-race.

'If they are as good with boats as Collingwood seems to think, they might either try to pick up Ali or put a party ashore,' returned Biggles.

They now stopped work to watch, for the outcome of the next few minutes was likely to have an important, if not vital, effect on what they were doing. The dhow, now not much more than a hundred yards from the reef and riding the swell, had in fact dropped a boat on the water . With five or six men in it, one standing in the stern with a long oar to act as a rudder, or to keep it steady, it was making its way to the reef. Ali was walking along the coral barrier towards the point where it seemed most likely to touch. That was the situation when horror struck. And it struck so swiftly that it was all over in a few minutes.

It began when an object like an enormous snake coiled up out of the water beside the boat. It whipped round the man standing in the stem and in a flash he had disappeared. That was only the beginning. The other men in the boat, apparently realizing exactly what had happened, began to row desperately away from the spot. For a moment or two it looked as if they might get clear . But no. Again the great tentacle — or it may have been another — coiled up to throw itself right across the boat. The men struck at it with their oars, but to no avail. The boat, half dragged under, overturned on top of them. It stood up on end in the water. For some seconds a small area of water was lashed into a sort of foaming whirlpool, half hidden from the spellbound watchers by a cloud of screaming gulls that had taken wing. The boat reappeared, floating upside down. Ali was running back to the mainland as fast as his legs would take him. Of all the crew of the boat one managed to get on the reef. He was lucky. He did not exactly get on it; he was thrown on it by a wave. Getting to his feet he raced, stumbling and swaying, towards the island. Ali, now on dry land, seeing him coming, stopped to wait for him.

As for the *dhow*, it did nothing in the way of rescue. There may have been nothing it could do. The crew remaining on board may have seen some danger to themselves. Be that as it may, the sail was run up and it stood away from the fearful spot.

Of the two horrified spectators on the beach, who had witnessed the calamity, speechless with the suddenness of it all, Biggles was the first to recover. He moistened his lips. White-faced he said to Algy ,

grimly: 'So the devil I killed wasn't alone. I remember reading somewhere that these giant squids live or travel in schools, like whales.'

Algy answered. 'What a shocker. I shall have nightmares for as long as we stay on this foul place. The man who named it Bonney Island must have been a joker. There's nothing bonny about it. I could find a better name than that.'

'Maybe the brutes have only recently arrived here,' surmised Biggles. 'Where did Ali go?'

They looked, but could not see him. Nor the survivor who had got ashore and had apparently joined him.

'Let's get on with the job,' Biggles said. 'There's nothing we can do about this nasty business. Like you, the sooner I'm off this perishing island the more comfortably I shall sleep o' nights. What can have happened to Collingwood? He'd see the *dhow* coming in. He must have seen the whole thing. I would have thought such a spectacle would have brought him here in a hurry.'

They worked on for about another hour when Biggles announced his intention of knocking off for a meal. 'I can't imagine what Collingwood can be doing. It's queer. Ali came here, so obviously he couldn't have been with him.'

Algy answered with a question. 'Did Ali know Collingwood was digging for opal?'

'I wouldn't know.' Biggles looked up sharply. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, we know Ali is in a hashish gang. If he knew what Collingwood was doing, being a crook he might decide there was more money in opal than in hashish and try to grab the mine when he saw his friends at hand. He might have found something in the hole when he took cover in it from the storm. He may have picked up a piece of opal from the landslide, as you did. If so, it could have given him ideas.'

'I take your point,' answered Biggles, slowly. 'I think it would be a good idea if, while I'm getting some grub ready, you went up to the hut to make sure Collingwood is all right. He may be sick, or had an accident, otherwise I can't imagine why he hasn't shown up. It shouldn't take you more than a few minutes.'

'Okay.'

Algy departed and Biggles went into the cabin to bring out some cans of food. He was opening one when he saw Algy coming back. At first he merely glanced up; then something about Algy's expression made him stop what he was doing to look again.

'Is something wrong?' he asked, as Algy strode up. 'Collingwood's dead,' announced Algy, curtly.

Biggles looked as if he did not understand. 'Say that again,' he requested.

'Collingwood's dead.'

'Dead!'

'That's what I said.'

'Is this some kind of joke?'

'Oh, have a heart, Biggles,' protested Algy impatiently. 'Would I joke about a thing like that?'

Incredulity raised Biggles' voice. 'But —but how could he be dead? He was as right as rain last night.'

'Maybe so. But he's dead now,' stated Algy grimly.

'Great grief! What happened? Did he have a stroke or something?'

'What he had was a bash on the skull, then a dagger pushed into his heart.'

'Are you telling me he was murdered?'

'That's exactly what I'm trying to make you understand. You seem to be a bit slow on the uptake this morning.'

'But I can't believe it.'

'Believe it or not, it's true. If you're shaken you can imagine how I felt when I went into the hut and found it looking like a slaughter-house.'

'What have you done?'

'Nothing. What could I do? I thought I'd better hurry back and let you know.'

'Yes. Of course.' Biggles sat on the sand as if his legs would not support him. 'This knocks me all of a heap. How could one have imagined such a thing —here, of all places. But there is this about it. There can be no mystery as to who did it. It must have been the Nab who came ashore from the *dhow*.'

Algy shook his head. 'You're wrong.'

'How could I be wrong? It couldn't have been Ali. We saw him on the reef.'

'Where had he been before that?'

'You think it was Ali? How do you work that out?' 'Because Collingwood has been dead for hours. The blood is dry. I think it must have been done last night. So who else could it have been but Ali? Apart from ourselves there was nobody else on the island.'

'The murdering swine,' grated Biggles. 'I still find it hard to believe.'

Why? Why did he do it? Why should he?'

'Work that one out for yourself. It's no use asking me. And tell me this. What are we going to do about it ? If you are able to arrest Ali for murder, what are you going to do with him? Put him in the machine? Take him to India? Aden?'

'Let me think,' requested Biggles. 'Help yourself to grub — if you can eat any. I can't. My appetite's gone. This has fairly knocked me flat ... cut my legs from under me.'

After a little while he went on. 'Before we do anything else we shall have to do something about Collingwood. We can't just leave him there lying on the floor, a prey for the flies.'

'I put him on the bed. He was in his pyjamas. He must have gone to bed when he was attacked and killed.'

Biggles got up. 'I'm going to the hut. You can stay here if you like.'

'I'll come with you,' Algy said. 'I'll eat something later, if I feel like food.'

On the way to the hut all Biggles said was: 'I still can't believe it.' And he said that several times. Once he added: 'I'm not saying I think Ali is incapable of murder. Being what he is, he probably is. But why? That's what beats me. Why kill a man with whom he must have been on good terms for weeks, perhaps months ? The only companion he had here. He must have had plenty of opportunities to kill him before this, if that was how he felt.'

'I'd say it was something to do with the arrival of the *dhow*,' offered Algy. 'Perhaps that was what he had been waiting for.'

Biggles did not answer. They came to the hut. They went in. The man they had not known for very long, but had suddenly come to know well, lay on his bed, cold in death. Biggles looked at him. 'I can't pretend I had any great love for him, but I wouldn't have wished him this,' he said, sadly. 'What rotten luck. Just as he had got what he had hoped for all his life. He'll never know it, but he was shouting too soon about opal not being unlucky. This is the sort of luck it's brought him. Not that I believe luck had anything to do with it. Well, Algy old lad, as they used to say in India when I was a boy, "his time had come", and that's all there is to it.' He pointed to a small sharp tool that lay on Collingwood's table with a little heap of scrapings. 'He said he would polish that piece of opal I found. He may have been working on it when he was struck down. I don't see it.' He looked around. Then, suddenly, he looked at Algy with an expression that suggested a thought had just occurred to him. 'I wonder. ..' he said softly. 'This morning you suggested that opal may have had something to do with what was going on. You may have been on the beam. Yes, I wonder.

Let's see.' He went quickly to the place from which Collingwood had produced the box containing his collection of precious stones in order to display it to them. The box was not there. It had gone.

Again Biggles looked at Algy. 'So that was it,' he breathed. 'Now we have the motive for the murder. Ali, the scoundrel, killed him for what he knew was here.'

Algy looked serious; and spoke seriously. 'What are we going to do about this, Biggles?'

'What do you suggest?'

'I'd say let's finish the machine and get home to make our report. Then somebody else, perhaps the Navy now there's a gap in the reef, can come out and tidy up this nasty business.'

For a moment Biggles did not answer.

'Well?' queried Algy.

'That, I must admit, would be the easiest way, provided we can get home, which is by no means certain. But I see objections. If we did as you suggest there would be talk, talk, and still more talk by the government departments concerned about who was to do what, and when. These things take time. When someone finally arrived here what would he find? Nothing. Not a sausage. Ali would have got away with murder and the fruits of it. No, I'm not having that.'

'What else can we do? We've no warrant to arrest Ali, and if we did, what could we do with him? I feel like shooting the black-hearted hound out of hand, but being what we are we can't do that.'

'I'm going to find him for a start,' announced Biggles. 'Whatever else may happen I'm not letting him get away with that opal. I don't want the stuff myself. I don't care if I never see it again. But I shall see that Ali doesn't get it.'

'Don't forget he's got a pal with him now, so there'll be a pair of them to handle.'

'I'm not forgetting anything,' stated Biggles, grimly. 'Do you want me to come with you?'

'No. We can't afford to leave the machine unguarded. You carry on with the work. I'll join you later. Keep your eyes open and your pistol handy. If Ali tries any- thing and gives you an excuse to use it, so much the better. Let's see what the *dhow* is doing.'

They went to the door and looked out to sea. The *dhow* was still there, sail half furled, about two miles off shore.

'What are they waiting for?' questioned Algy.

Biggles answered. 'My guess is they're waiting for the sea to go down sufficiently for them to make the passage into the lagoon.'

They're not going to risk making another landing on the reef. Even if they have another small boat, which I doubt, there won't be a rush of volunteers to man it. After what's happened I can well understand that.'

They went back into the hut and wrapped the body of the unlucky Australian in his blanket. 'We shall have to bury him here,' Biggles said. 'We can't fly the body home in this heat even if we can get the machine airborne. It would lead to too many complications *en route*, anyway. We saw a spade in the next hut. But that will have to wait until tomorrow. We've more urgent things to do at the moment. You get down to the machine right away and carry on. I'm going to find that murdering Arab and have it out with him. I'll see you later.'

So saying, Biggles strode off down the runway.

Algy, deep in thought, walked quickly to the beach where the Gadfly stood with her recently applied patches drying in the sun.

CHAPTER 14

DEATH STRIKES AGAIN

BIGGLES did not know where Ali had gone with the man who had got ashore from the *dhow*, but as he was not at the huts, he could only be at the far end of the island, either at the place where the hemp had been grown, in the hollow where the mine was situated, or the palm-frond shelter which Collingwood had said he had built for himself near the coconuts. In any case the size of the island set a small limit to the area to be searched and he had no doubt about finding the two Arabs eventually. He assumed they would remain together. That would be natural in the circumstances.

How Ali would react to his accusation of murder when he did find him was a matter for speculation. In his present mood Biggles didn't care. Inwardly seething with anger at the treacherous nature of the killing, he was not prepared to tolerate any threat of violence from Ali, or, for that matter, from either of the two Arabs, who he imagined were still together now discussing the situation.

Indeed, he almost hoped Ali would make an attempt to kill him and so furnish him with the excuse of self-defence to shoot him out of hand. Cold-blooded murder he had always abhorred; but that a man should deprive another of his life, and in this case a man who had befriended him, for no other reason than to gain possession of his property, filled him with such loathing that he was almost prepared to take the law into his own hands.

What explanation Ali would give his new companion to account for the disappearance of the hemp was also a matter for surmise. No doubt he had an excuse ready. One that would clear him of any blame, of course. It was not unlikely that he would make that his reason for killing Collingwood. If the new arrival had been one of the original crew, as seemed probable, he would know about Collingwood being there, for the solitary white man had been a subject for discussion; so it would be natural for him to ask after him; to inquire, for instance, if he had kept his promise to ignore them.

Actually, Biggles didn't care what lies Ali told. Striding on he took no pains to conceal his approach, even though Ali must know that by now the murder would have been discovered. No doubt, pondered Biggles, the murderer had hoped to be aboard the *dhow* by now; either that or he would be able to rely on the support of the entire crew when they came ashore; as would have been the case had not the sea monster intervened. Either way, Ali would have reckoned on being safe from retribution for the foul crime he had committed. He had waited for the *dhow* to arrive before doing the dastardly act which he hoped would make him rich for life. There was no other possible motive for the murder of an innocent man; innocent in that he had stuck to the letter of his agreement with the Arabs. Ali knew that.

So reasoned Biggles as he came to his first objective. All he knew for certain was that as things stood at present the situation was such that anything could happen, and whatever it turned out to be it could only be unpleasant.

Coming within sight of the end of the island, he steadied his pace to look around. He could not see the men for whom he was searching. He went on to the hollow. They were not there. He hailed, but there was no answer. He did not go down to the mine because after what had happened there he could not imagine Ali taking the risk of being buried a second time. He went on to the spot where the hemp had been grown. Again there was nobody there. This was as near the tip of the island as Biggles had ever been. Where was the hut which according to Collingwood Ali had built for himself? He had never seen it so could only conclude it was still farther on, under, or not far from, the coconuts. Hitherto he had kept clear of them for fear of a nut falling on his head. Sure that any that were ready to fall must have been brought down by the hurricane, he went on to investigate.

He had not far to go. Topping a sand dune he saw a beehive-shaped structure just beyond the palms, almost within reach of the spray that was being flung into the air by the breakers still thundering on the exposed beach. He approached the hut cautiously, although the noise of the waves would prevent any sound he made from being heard; but

he wanted if possible to catch Ali unprepared.

He observed that the entrance to the primitive shelter faced towards him; but it was covered, or partly covered, by a flap of woven palm leaves which served as a door. He advanced to it a little on one side and stopped. With his automatic pistol in hand to be ready for anything that might happen, bearing in mind that he took it for granted the two Arabs would be together, he said loudly enough for anyone inside to hear: 'Ali. Come out. I want to talk to you.'

There was no answer. No sound of movement.

'Ali, come out,' repeated Biggles. 'You can hear me.'

Still no reply.

Walking forward, using his left hand, for the gun was in the other, he reached out and threw the flap wide open. At first he could see nothing clearly, for in comparison with the brilliant sunshine outside the interior of the hut was dark. Leaning forward, peering into the gloom, he could just make out something on the ground. It looked like a heap of rags, but it was roughly the shape of a human body. It did not move.

'It's no use, Ali,' Biggles said sharply. 'Get up. I can see you.' He stood poised ready to jump clear should he be attacked.

The bundle did not move. No sound came. There was something unnatural about the quality of the silence.

Suspecting a trick, with a quick movement Biggles ripped the flap right off. Nothing happened. He pulled off a handful of fronds to let in more light. Now he could see more clearly he was able to make out Ali lying flat on the sandy floor. He was lying on his back with one leg drawn up. His eyes were open. Without blinking they stared up at the roof. Conscious of a sudden chill, with the pistol still at the ready, Biggles, very slowly, went in. He touched Ali with his foot. The Arab did not move. He stared down into his face, and as he did so he caught his breath in a swift gasp as he realized the truth. It was Ali. Dead. There was blood on his shirt-like robe. There was a pool of congealed blood on the sand.

With his brain reeling, Biggles backed into the open air, numb from shock; the second in a few hours. He found it hard to think; but this did not prevent him from looking around swiftly for the man who must have killed the one inside the hut. The second Arab. The one who had just come ashore. There was no possible room for doubt. No one else could have done it. No one. He could not see him.

Moistening his lips, which had suddenly dried, Biggles strove for composure. The shock of Collingwood's death had shaken him severely, coming as it did so suddenly and unexpectedly. This, coming

closely on top of it, before he had fully recovered, seemed for a few moments to have stunned his faculty for lucid thought. He tried to light a cigarette, and accustomed as he was to the sight of sudden death, he was annoyed to find his hands shaking. Such can be the effect of shock. What he had found was so utterly unexpected. When he had started to look for Ali he would have declared that nothing would surprise him. This did. It was the last, the very last thing he could have anticipated.

Recovering somewhat, he tried to get the situation in perspective. To reason it out. To solve a mystery which at first sight seemed inexplicable. Yet the facts were simple. Ali had been murdered. He had been killed by the Arab who had come ashore from the *dhow*, a man who almost certainly would know him; possibly a friend. Why? That was the unanswerable question. Why?

Had it been the other way about, Biggles thought, it would have been easier to understand. Ali might have killed the newcomer in self-defence if, on seeing what had happened to the crop, he had lost his temper and drawn a weapon. Biggles considered the same possibility in reverse. No, he decided, that wasn't the answer. Had there been a fight over the loss of the hashish it would have happened there and then, on the spot, at the moment of discovery. That could not have happened because the two men must have gone on together to the hut. They would have had time to cool down. The hashish had nothing to do with it. It must have been something else. What else was there to fight about? He could think of only one possibility. It came as a glimmer of light in a fog. The opal. The wealth for which Ali had murdered Collingwood.

Biggles drew on his cigarette. There was nothing else. That *had* to be the answer. The Arab who had just come ashore was a crook. They were all crooks, otherwise they wouldn't be engaged in a drug racket. Men in such a dangerous business, as Biggles knew, thought only of themselves. All were potential murderers should the necessity arise. Ali had killed Collingwood to get his collection of opal. There was no other motive, and the disappearance of it from Collingwood's hut was proof. There was no one else on the island to take it.

Biggles lit another cigarette, still pondering. Could Ali, in a moment of delight, of vanity perhaps, have been so stupid as to show what he had stolen to a man who, in the course of his nefarious trade, would think little of murder? If so, retribution had followed with a vengeance. Where would Ali go with his loot? Surely to his hut. It should still be there.

Stifling his repugnance, still alert in case the murderer should be watching him, Biggles went back into the hut and made a thorough

search for the box of precious stones, even going as far as to scrape up the sandy floor. It did not take long. There was no other place where it might be hidden. It was not there. Not even a loose opal. So that was it! Biggles drew a long breath. Now he was sure of it. He smiled grimly. The opals seemed to be living up to their evil reputation.

He was about to leave the hut when a thought struck him. He had seen natives hide articles in their thick uncut hair. It would be as well, while he was there, to make sure. First he took off Ali's *kafieh* (headdress) and felt round it with his hands. They encountered something hard. He removed the object. It was a piece of opal that had not been with the rest in the box. It was in fact the piece of milk-white opal which he himself had found; the piece that Collingwood had said he would polish for him. One half had been polished. It flashed fire at him. Collingwood might have been working on it when Ali had walked in and struck him down. Ali, in his haste to get away, had stuck it in his *kafieh*.

In a curious fit of repulsion Biggles went out and flung the stone as far as he could into the foaming surf. This was not because he was superstitious. Such a thought was too ridiculous to be entertained. It was because he suddenly hated the stuff which, simply for its value, had just cost two men their lives. Its reputation for bad luck could have had nothing to do with it, but the fact remained that had it not been for the opal two men who were now dead would still be alive.

A giant comber crashed on the spot where the stone ;: had fallen and it was lost to sight for ever.

Having solved the mystery, at any rate to his own satisfaction, Biggles now applied himself to the next probable step in the ladder of disaster. Where was the murderer? Where had he gone? What would he do? It seemed most likely that he would lose no time in getting off the island, away from the scene of his crime. The only way he could do that would be to get to the dhow. If he had gone by way of the coastline it would account for them not meeting, Biggles having taken the easy way to the far end of the island. What would the murderer do next, he wondered. Filled with a sudden sense of urgency, chiefly anxiety for Algy, he took the quickest way back to the lagoon to rejoin him.

His concern increased when he came to within sight of the sea on the sheltered side of the island. It had gone down considerably; faster than he had expected. Waves were no longer coming over the reef, but seas were still surging through the gap to disturb the water in the lagoon, so that it did not yet present its normal surface of unruffled calm. It was evident, however, that with the turn of the tide, now nearly at flood level, the picture would change. This would mean the

Gadfly would, if the repair work was complete, be able to take off. On the other hand it also meant the *dhow* would soon be able to risk running through the gap to come to anchor in the lagoon. From there it would have no difficulty in putting a landing party ashore. This appeared to be the *dhow's* intention, for it was standing in much closer than when Biggles had last seen it.

Pausing for a moment to survey the scene, he could see Algy still working on the aircraft, but of the Arab who had murdered Ali there was still no sign. That did not mean he was not on his way to rejoin his ship because there were places where sand dunes, running parallel with the coast, intervened to cut off the view of the actual shore. He thought it likely that the Arab was somewhere out of sight below him. However, he was relieved to see that Algy had come to no harm during his absence.

Afraid that if the Arab saw him alone he might try to do him, or the machine, a mischief, he broke into a run, determined if possible to get there first. He still had some distance to go.

CHAPTER 15 AND AGAIN

IN his effort to reach Algy before the Arab could get near him, Biggles succeeded, but as a result of his exertions he arrived somewhat out of breath.

'What's the hurry?' inquired Algy casually, continuing to apply varnish over a newly applied patch on the hull.

'When you've heard the piece of news I have for you, you'll know,' panted Biggles. 'This is soon likely to be a hot spot.'

'I can see the *dhow* moving in as if it's going to have another shot at landing, if that's what you mean. Did you find Ali?'

'I did.'

'What had the murdering hound to say for himself?'

'Nothing.'

'So he wouldn't talk?'

'He couldn't.'

Algy stopped work to look up. 'Why not?'

'He's dead.'

Algy nearly dropped the brush. 'Dead! Ah! I get it. He turned nasty and you had to shoot him.'

'I didn't have to do anything to him. He was dead when I found him. He was in his shelter. Someone had sliced him up with a knife. Fairly caught me on one foot, I can tell you. I didn't have to strain anything to work out who'd killed him. There was only one other man on the island apart from ourselves. His new pal. The chap we saw get ashore.'

Algy looked astounded. 'But this is fantastic. Why on earth should he —'

'I can tell you the answer to that one, too,' returned Biggles, grimly.

'Because of what had happened to the hemp?'

'I don't think the hemp had anything to do with it.' 'What, then?'

'Collingwood's collection of opals has disappeared. We know Ali took them. They are not in the wigwam place Ali built for himself. It follows that the new man now has them.' Biggles went on to describe what he had found on arrival at Ali's shelter, and what he had done. 'Now you'll see why I was in a hurry,' he concluded. 'Anything could happen now.'

'Where's the devil who knifed Ali?'

'I wish I knew. I haven't seen him. Have you seen anyone?'

'Not a soul He can't have come this way.'

'I reckoned he might, to be near the *dhow* if it comes in. I was also afraid he might have a crack at you if he saw you were alone. That was why I came back at the double.'

'Phew! What a stinking place this is. What happens next?'

'As I see it everything will depend on what this cutthroat Arab does when he joins his pals on the *dhow*, and what they do. That I imagine will depend on how much the villain tells them. He's got the opal. Will he show it to the others or will he keep it up his shirt? If he says nothing about it they'll probably come ashore to check up on their hemp. He may say we did away with it. If he shows the rest of the crew what he's got, they'll demand a share and perhaps come ashore looking for more opal. Not being fools, they're bound to know the stuff is worth a lot of money. On the other hand, thinking they've made a rich haul, they may push off altogether.'

'If they come ashore to look for more opal; they won't want us to see what they're doing,' said Algy meaningly.

'That's what I'm afraid of,' rejoined Biggles. 'It seems to me that our position depends on this confounded Arab now loose on the island. The snag is we don't know how much Ali told him before he got a knife in his ribs. Unless the box of opal came to light by accident, he must have told him about it, or how would he know it existed? Did Ali

say where it came from? Did he say that it was to get it that he had killed Collingwood? Did he say Collingwood had cut the hemp and that was why he had killed him? We don't know. In fact, there's too much we don't know and guessing isn't going to help us. Only the behaviour of the Arabs on the *dhow* may tell us how the land lies, and that may be too late to be any use to us for a guide. Which brings me to the vital question. How's the machine?

'Not too bad. I'd fly it at a pinch; but it would be safer to give her another day for the patches to get thoroughly dry. Otherwise I'd say let's push off right away and turn our tail to this beastly dump. There's no longer any reason for us to stay here.'

'Haven't you forgotten something ?'

'What have I forgotten ?'

'Collingwood. We can't leave his body just lying there in the hut. I'm not going to do that. We shall have to bury him.' Biggles smiled whimsically. 'After all, he promised, with his usual sarcasm, to give us a Christian funeral if we came to grief here. The least we can do is give him one. There's something with a twist of humour in that, when you come to think about it.'

'Couldn't we bury him now?'

'There isn't time before dark; moreover, as things stand at present I don't feel like leaving the machine unattended. I'd rather not take off over the reef in the dark, anyway. I'd feel more comfortable if we made a test flight, to make sure she's okay, before starting off on a thousand miles of open sea. What we can do is get these pegs out and make ready to move. I'll look over her to make sure you haven't missed anything. With all these patches she looks as if she'd flown through an anti-aircraft barrage.'

Biggles was on the hull when Algy said: 'What can have happened to the skunk who killed Ali? He must still be on the island somewhere. He couldn't have got back to the *dhow* without me seeing him.'

'He may be lying low until his ship comes close enough in for him to get aboard,' Biggles answered.

'Are we going to try to stop him getting back on board?'

'I'd like to. Not that we could do anything with him if we caught him. I'm not thinking about him so much as Collingwood's opal. What sticks in my gizzard is the thought of him getting away with it.'

'Do you want it?'

'Not me. But I don't like the idea of anyone getting away with the fruits of murder. When I started back for you, I thought he might be following the coast, which would take longer than the way I came, along the runway. He might be doing that. I'd rather know where he

was than have him slinking about, perhaps waiting for a chance to stick his dagger into us. By standing on the centre-section I should be able to get a view over the top of the reef and so along the shore. I'll have a look. Pass me the binoculars.'

Algy fetched the glasses from the cabin and handed them to Biggles, still standing on the hull. While he was getting into position, and focusing, Biggles said: 'It looks to me as if it may not be long before the dhow makes a run for the gap to get into the lagoon. It's creeping closer all the time. I can see a man half-way up the mast, looking this way. I fancy he's having a good look at us.'

'I can see him,' Algy said. 'He seems to be making signals to somebody. Could it be the man who got ashore? They could hardly be meant for us.'

'Well, the rogue doesn't seem to be coming along the coast,' replied Biggles, getting down off the machine.

'No! Look! There he is !' Algy pointed.

Biggles' eyes followed the finger. The Arab had appeared over the ridge from the direction of the huts. Ignoring the aircraft, he was walking towards the far end of the reef; that is, to the point where it joined the island farthest from the spot where the giant squid incident had occurred.

'He must have been to Collingwood's hut,' Biggles said tersely. 'For what? More loot? To confirm that Collingwood was dead? How the devil did he get there without me seeing him? He's taking the shortest way to the *dhow* when it comes in. He'd be able to jump aboard as it came through the gap. Or he may hope it will come to fetch him. That must have been what the signalling was about. What's that he's got under his arm?' Biggles raised the binoculars. 'By thunder! I might have guessed. It's Collingwood's box of opal. He's not going to get away with that if I can prevent it.'

'We can't stop him.'

'We can try. You run up the ridge. When you're over the top out of sight dash along till you're the other side of him; then run down and cut him off. If he tries to get back this way I'll stop him. Get the box. Never mind the man. We don't want him. Got your gun?'

'In my pocket.'

'You may need it. Get cracking. We'll beat him yet.' Algy ran up the sand dune, which actually formed the ridge, and disappeared over the top. Biggles waited, watching. The arab must have been supremely confident, for not once did he look round. He walked on along the edge of the lagoon without any particular haste. Once he waved to the man on the mast and got an answering wave; which showed that he

was being watched from the *dhow*. But when Algy suddenly ran down the ridge in front of him he seemed to be surprised. He stopped. Then, when Algy advanced with the obvious intention of intercepting him, he turned back, walking faster. Then, of course, he saw Biggles coming towards him. Again he stopped. When Biggles began to close on him from one direction, and Algy from the other, he must have realized he was trapped.

For a few seconds he hesitated; then he took the only course open to him, although this was one Biggles did not expect, which he might have done since it was fairly obvious. The Arab walked out into the water. Biggles dashed forward, shouting to him to stop. The Arab took no notice. He may not have heard; or not understood. At all events he continued to walk out into the lagoon. Biggles ran up. So did Algy. Then, to their chagrin, finding himself out of depth, the Arab began to swim quietly towards the reef. He used a back stroke, being hampered no doubt by the box he carried under his arm.

As Biggles and Algy came together Biggles said angrily: 'Confound it. He's foxed us.' With that he started to walk out into the water apparently with the intention of pursuing the swimmer. But Algy grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back. 'Are you crazy?' he shouted. 'Look !'

Biggles looked; and came back. 'Thanks,' he acknowledged. 'I didn't notice that.'

On the still slightly ruffled water of the lagoon had appeared a large, black, triangular fin; the unmistakable indication of a shark. It was moving slowly but steadily towards the Arab who, unconscious of his danger, was still paddling comfortably on his back towards the outer perimeter of the reef. Instinctively Biggles let out a yell of warning. It was ignored.

Biggles and Algy could only stand and watch. 'So that beauty is still around,' muttered Biggles.

The shark did not go straight to its intended victim; but it must have seen or heard him, for the sinister fin made a slow circle round him. Then, of course, the Arab saw his peril. He splashed furiously. This caused the shark to retire a little way, which suggested it might not be a man-eater after all. But it came back and did another circle, this time contracting. The wretched man in the water now struck out with a powerful overarm. stroke towards the nearest point of the reef, still using only one arm.

'Why doesn't the fool drop the box and use both arms?' muttered Biggles. 'If he did he might have a chance. He's got a dagger.' Raising his voice he yelled : 'Drop the box.'

For a second or two it looked as if the Arab might escape the

dreadful fate which threatened. Helpless to do anything, Biggles and Algy could only stand and stare. Neither spoke. Then the fin disappeared.

'That's it,' muttered Biggles. 'He's had it. A shark attacks from below.'

He was right. Screaming, the Arab threw up his arms. There was a flurry of water. Then he, too, disappeared.

Nothing broke the surface. 'Horrible,' breathed Algy, moistening his lips. 'Poor devil. As you remarked, Biggles, this is no bathing pool for kids.'

'Nor anyone else.' Biggles lit a cigarette. Then, flicking away the dead matchstick, speaking with slow deliberation he said: 'You know, chaps, if this sort of thing goes on, I shall have to revise my opinion that this talk of opal being an unlucky stone is a lot of hooley. First Collingwood. Then Ali. Now this. Ail the opal has brought them its sudden death. Queer, isn't it?'

'There is this about it,' stated Algy. 'The curse can't go on any longer. The stuff that wretched Collingwood turned himself into a Crusoe to find is now at the bottom of the sea; and as far as I'm concerned it can stay there.'

'Not necessarily.'

'Where else could the box be?'

'In the shark's belly. Funny things have been found in a shark's stomach.'

'But a shark wouldn't swallow a wooden box!'

'They say a shark will swallow anything. Old sailors say a shark will even swallow its own entrails after being disembowelled and thrown back into the sea.'

'Charming thought.'

'If this one has swallowed a whole box of opal, if there is anything in the curse it should soon be having a belly-ache. Its dead body should provide a nice little haul, and a surprising one, for the lucky person who finds it thrown up on a beach somewhere.'

'Did you say *lucky* person? I'd say it would be the worst day's work he ever did. I wouldn't touch the stuff with a barge pole.'

'Let's not argue about it,' Biggles said. 'Our next problem will arise if the *dhow* gets into the lagoon and makes a landing before we can get off.'

'At least they'll know we weren't responsible for that Arab's death. The man on the mast must have seen the whole thing. He's gone down now. No doubt he'll be telling the others all about it.'

'Let's get back to the machine,' Biggles said curtly. 'What we've just seen wasn't pretty.'

With the sun sinking fast towards the horizon they made their way back along the beach to the aircraft.

'What next ?' asked Algy.

Biggles answered. 'I'm going to have something substantial to eat, and take my time over it. Then I hope to have a nice long rest. I'm tired.' 'What if the *dhow* comes in ?'

'We can't stop it. We'll see how they shape. I don't think it'll try to get in tonight. It's a dangerous reef. Most coral reefs are. The entrance to the lagoon isn't very wide. It's my guess the man in charge will wait till morning when, with the sun well up, he'll be better able to see what he's doing. The sea should have calmed down a little more by then, too. You realize that the fate of that miserable Arab has put an entirely different complexion on the set-up here. He was unlucky; let's admit it. Neither he nor anyone else would expect a man-eater to be in a lagoon of this size.'

'The gap in the reef must have been responsible for that.'

'Of course. But I was about to say, the question of what the Arab would have told them doesn't arise. The men on the *dhow* won't know a thing about what's happened here. They don't know Collingwood is dead, or how he died. They're not to know Ali is dead or who killed him. They know nothing about the opal. They don't know their precious hemp has been blitzed. In a word, they'll expect to find everything here as they left it. When they come ashore they'll have a few shocks.'

'So shall we, I imagine.'

'I don't see why. I think the chances are, when the people on the *dhow* discover what's happened, they'll come to us for information. I only hope one of 'em .can speak English because my Arabic isn't up to much.'

'They may think we did the killing.'

'I shall deny that. I shall tell them the truth; exactly what happened; without of course saying anything about the opal that was the cause of the trouble. Our tale should be supported by the fact that they knew Ali was alive when they got here. They must have seen him on the reef when the boat was clawed under by the decapod — or whatever the thing was. From the *dhow* they would see one of the crew get ashore and go off with Ali. Why, then, should they suppose we had anything to do with Ali's death? What reason had we to kill him? They'll have the wit to realize that people like us don't go about stabbing people to death. We don't carry daggers. When we have to do

any rough stuff we use guns. When they come ashore, not seeing Ali here to meet them, they'll go along to have a look at their hemp. That's when they'll find Ali's body. I didn't touch it. They'll see he was killed by knife wounds. Then they'll come to us to see if we know what happened.'

'What will you tell 'em ?'

'We can talk about that when the time comes. Leave it to me. In the morning, whether or not the *dhow* is in the lagoon, we'll go to the hut and bury Collingwood's body. We must do that. Then we'll test the machine and if she behaves properly we'll talk about starting for home. With luck we should get to Calcutta in time to prevent Bertie from coming to look for us. I told him to give us a week before doing anything. I said: "When we're back at Calcutta I'll send a radio signal. If you get no signal, come on to the island." That was clear enough. Come to think of it there's one other thing we ought to do before we leave here.'

Algy looked pained. 'Haven't we enough to do without thinking up anything else ? What is it now ?'

'I think we should clear the worst of that rubbish the storm left on the landing strip. It shouldn't take long. We owe it to a brother pilot; Collingwood's pal Mackay. He knows nothing about what's happened here. Sooner or later he'll come here, as he promised, to see how Collingwood is doing or to pick him up. It'd be tragic if in trying to land he bent his undercart and got stuck here. We might see him in Calcutta, in which case we could save him making the trip. But we can't rely on that. We might miss him. It's up to us to make it safe for him to land if he should fly out.'

Algy agreed. 'Now let's see about something to eat,' Biggles concluded as they reached the aircraft.

'Talking about getting a good sleep, aren't we going to mount a guard ?' queried Algy.

'I don't think that's necessary. There's nobody on the island except ourselves.'

'What if the *dhow* should come in ?'

'As I said, I don't think it will try before morning. There's still a bit of a sea running outside. If they did come in I can't see why they should interfere with us. We've done nothing, as far as they know, to hurt them. I'm not likely to volunteer the information that it was me who cut down their hemp. After all, these chaps aren't savages. They're civilized men from Aden, or one of the other ports along the coast where they would meet people like us. I shan't worry about them now that none of their people is here to blame us for what has

been happening. But let's get out some grub. I'm starving.'

CHAPTER 16

STRANGER THAN FICTION

BIGGLES was wrong. At least in one respect. When he awoke the following morning —or rather, when he was awakened by Algy —to another fine day, it was to see the dhow, sail furled, riding at anchor in the middle of the lagoon. He was surprised because the sea outside had not yet really settled. From time to time a heavy swell, accompanied by a gust of wind, aftermaths of the storm, would surge against the reef and pour through the gap like a small tidal wave to set the surface of the lagoon gently heaving. The backwash would rush back just as furiously. He could only conclude that these conditions must have arisen recently, probably just before sunrise, or the dhow would not have risked damage to her wooden hull on the jagged edges of the coral which above the waterline were as hard as granite. However, there was the dhow, safe and sound.

His other opinion, that the crew would not interfere with them, appeared to have been correct, for while there was considerable activity on deck, no notice was being taken of them.

'Let's have some breakfast and press on with what we have to do,' Biggles told Algy, who was obviously a little startled to see the Arab craft so close to them. 'Our best ploy will be to behave as if we've nothing to be afraid of, and in fact have no interest whatever in what they're doing. I don't think they can have been in the lagoon very long.'

While they were having their coffee, and ration of Quaker Oats with condensed milk, their mainstay on long hauls where no fresh food was available, it was also revealed that Biggles had been mistaken when he had said the *dhow* was not likely to have a second lifeboat. It had; a rough-looking dinghy; for they now saw it put on the water with the apparent intention of taking a party ashore.

'There seems to be plenty of 'em,' remarked Algy, with a touch of apprehension. 'We couldn't do much against that mob if they turned nasty. How many hands do these *dhow*s normally carry?'

'I've never counted, but those I've seen seem to have about twenty.'

'Good lor! As many as that! Where do they all sleep?' 'Anywhere. They don't waste space with cabins. They just doss down anywhere they can find room; but I believe there's some rule about each man sticking to his own pitch, where he eats, sleeps, and does his cooking

if there's anything to cook. Fish, I've been told, is the regular diet. Fish and dates or dried figs and tomatoes. Not to worry. They won't bother with us.'

The lifeboat, if it could be so called, looking dangerously overloaded with five men in it, one standing in the stern operating a long oar as a rudder, was now on its way to the island beach. In spite of what Biggles had said, for they were a ferocious-looking lot, it was an anxious moment when they stepped out into shallow water and hauled their boat high and dry. But the anxiety did not last long. The aircraft was completely ignored. It might not have been there. For a brief period the men stood looking around, probably for Ali; then they all moved off in the direction of the far end of the island, either to find him or look at the crop of hemp, or both.

'They're going to have a surprise of considerable dimensions when they find their hashish gone and Ali looking like a stuck pig,' murmured Biggles. 'If we're going to have any trouble that's when it win come. Let's carry on.'

First they went to the landing strip and removed any of the larger obstructions that might have made a landing dangerous. But it was mostly light stuff, the spines of palm fronds and the like, so it did not take long. This done they went on to the Nissen huts to do a more disagreeable task. Algy fetched the spade from the unused hut where they had seen it and they set to work to dig a grave. Fortunately, the ground being sandy, no great effort was needed; and as Biggles remarked, there was no purpose in digging deep. They had just done all that Biggles considered necessary when the party of Arabs could be seen approaching hurriedly along the runway.

'Here we go. Here comes trouble,' sighed Algy. 'I wish you wouldn't be so pessimistic,' complained Biggles. 'We should be able to talk ourselves out of this.'

They waited. The Arabs came up, every man with a sheathed dagger hanging from his waist. One, apparently the leader, stepped forward. He was a tall, fine figure of a man, with dark flashing eyes and a nose like an eagle's beak, which gave him a fierce expression. He looked like, and may have been, a tribal chief of some sort. There was no preamble. He came straight to the point. And so began one of the most bizarre conversations Algy in all his experience had ever heard.

'You English mans?' he challenged harshly.

'Yes, English,' Biggles answered calmly.

'Why you kill Ali?'

'No kill Ali.'

'Who kill?'

'Your man who came ashore.'

The chief looked as if he didn't believe this. 'Why he kill Ali?'

'Because Ali kills Collingwood. You know him, the man who lived here?'

'Yes.' The chief was looking as if he found this even harder to believe. 'Why Ali kill Collswood ?'

'Collingwood rich. Has money in box. Ali kills him. Takes money. Your man who comes ashore. Sees money. Kills Ali. He swims in lagoon with box. Meets shark. You see this.' Biggles spoke simply the more easily to be understood. 'He swims like this.' Biggles went through the motions of a man swimming with one arm, the other held against his side. 'You see this ?'

'Yes.'

'He has money box under arm,' explained Biggles.

It is not to be supposed that this extraordinary conversation was conducted as easily as it may appear. It was accompanied by gestures, pauses and translations into Arabic for the benefit of those who apparently knew no English. The men crowded round, staring, sometimes uncomprehendingly. The chief never took his eyes from Biggles' face.

'Why you come here ?' he asked suspiciously. 'We look for lost plane. Think here on island perhaps. You understand ? Plane. Lost.'

'What you do now?'

'We bury Collingwood. Then we go home.' So far, Algy noticed, neither hemp nor hashish had been mentioned. No doubt the Arab thought it wise to keep off the subject and Biggles certainly had no reason to mention it.

'Where Collswood ?' asked the chief, as if seeking confirmation of what Biggles had said. Only he knew what he was thinking.

Biggles pointed to the hut.

The chief strode in, his men crowding in behind him.

Biggles took the opportunity to speak quietly to Algy. 'I think it's okay. But they're finding this a bit hard to swallow.'

'I can understand that,' replied Algy. 'So am I.'

The Arabs trooped out of the hut. The chief gave Biggles a long penetrating stare. 'Now you go home ?'

'Yes.'

'No comeback?'

'No come back,' echoed Biggles. 'This place no good.'

Without another word the chief turned about and walked away, followed by his men babbling excitedly in Arabic.

Algy breathed a sigh of relief.

'Let's get this miserable business over and done with,' said Biggles shortly.

Collingwood's body, still in its blanket, was carried out and put in its grave. Biggles uttered the few words of the burial service that he could remember. The grave was filled in and they returned in sombre silence to the aircraft. By the time they reached it the Arabs were climbing back on board the *dhow*.

'What will they do now, do you suppose ?' Algy said. Biggles shrugged. 'I hope they'll push off. But I think it's more likely they'll wait till we've gone and then plant another lot of hemp.'

'They must have seen the first lot had been cut. Why didn't they mention it?'

Biggles shook his head. 'I wouldn't know. Don't ask me to tell you what they think. For a guess I'd say they thought it better to keep their mouths shut in case we didn't know what they'd been doing here. To raise hashish is illegal, anyway on British Crown property, as they must know only too well. They may have thought Collingwood cut the stuff and that was why Ali killed him. That was murder. They must know that, too, so they kept off the subject.'

'Good. Well, I suggest we make for home in case they should change their minds.'

'Unfortunately we can't do that for the moment.'

'Why not ?'

'Look at the *dhow*. Stuck in the middle of the fairway. The only straight run long enough in the lagoon for the machine to come unstuck on flat water.'

'Couldn't we ask them to move their confounded boat somewhere else ?'

'I suppose we could, but I think it would be better to leave well alone. They won't stay here long. We're in no great hurry now. Let's have a drink and a cigarette while we're waiting. After such a morning I need a tonic.'

Algy went on. 'I've got a feeling the chief took your story about Collingwood having money with a pinch of salt. Why should he bring money where he couldn't spend it ?'

'I had to say something; provide a motive for the murder. I didn't feel like complicating matters by introducing opal. That might have led to trouble. It might have been a temptation to them to bump us off

to look for the source of the opal if it was to be found on the island. Money meant practically the same thing, but safer for us. They won't trouble to dig for money.'

'What the dickens are they doing now ?' Algy was looking at the *dhow*, where there was now a lot of activity with three men getting back into the lifeboat. They pushed off clear but seemed to be trailing a rope.

'How would I know ?' answered Biggles. ' All I know is, while they scull about the lagoon with that line, it would be daft for us to try to get off,'

They watched with interest as the lifeboat moved about with one man rowing quietly while the other two peered over the side into the blue water.

'I've got it!' exclaimed Algy suddenly. 'They're looking for the shark that swallowed their pal.'

'With what object ?' inquired Biggles cynically.

'To kill it, so it couldn't get anyone else who happened to fall in,,' Biggles did not answer.

'I swear they must be fishing,' Algy said presently. 'I can't imagine what else they could be doing.'

'Fishing for what ?'

'The shark.'

'Listen, Algy,' protested Biggles. 'To these fellows sharks must be as common as hens in a farmyard. Why should they bother with this one?'

'I fancy they've hooked it, anyway,' said Algy sharply as there was a yell and a stir of activity on the deck of the *dhow*. The rope was pulled taut. The small craft made back for the *dhow* at top speed. The men in it scrambled aboard. In the middle of the lagoon there was a great swirl and a mighty splash. A black dorsal fin raced through the water.

Fascinated, Biggles and Algy watched the struggle that followed. The shark fought, but the small army of men on the *dhow* hung on to the rope like a team in a tug of war. Slowly but surely the big fish was dragged in close. Amid great excitement a tackle was slung round it. A winch pulled it up and it fell inboard, whereupon men with axes proceeded to dispatch it. When it was dead there was a pause as they all gathered round it.

Suddenly there was a great shout of triumph.

'By thunder! I believe they've got it,' cried Biggles.

'Got what ?'

'The money box. Of course! That was what they were after. Algy, old boy, you were right first time. I've never seen anything like this; nor could I have imagined.

'So the opal is carrying on with its jinx,' Algy said. 'Now it's the shark's turn for the bad luck.'

'Poppycock,' scoffed Biggles. 'The shark would have died the same way if it had been a box of money in its belly. What will the *dhow* do now the crew have found a treasure? That's the question.'

'I suppose they'll know what the stuff is?'

'Bound to. They must have seen it in jewellers' shop . windows, if nowhere else.'

'If they have any sense they'll chuck the infernal stuff overboard,' growled Algy.

Instead, it was the shark's body that went overboard. Its entrails followed.

Presently Biggles said: 'I think the shark may have done us a good turn. It looks to me as if they're satisfied with what they've got and have decided to pull out.'

Activities on the *dhow* certainly suggested this. The anchor — a lump of rock — was pulled in, and the big lateen sail hauled up.

'Good,' Biggles said. 'That suits us fine.'

'Before they reach home they may be sorry they fiddled with a lot of opal,' remarked Algy. 'They've got enough on board to send a battleship to the bottom.'

They watched the *dhow* approach the gap in the reef. It reached it and sailed through —almost. But just as it put its bows into the open sea it met one of the big swells that still occasionally rolled up. It was thrown back, and from where they stood Biggles and Algy could hear the splintering of timbers as it struck the side of the gap. The backwash threw it out again. There was some frenzied work on board. The sail was trimmed, and just as it looked as if the *dhow* would get clear, another wave came and threw it broadside on against the outer reef. There was a crunch that made Biggles flinch. The mast went by the board and the sail with it.

'Now what about it?' cried Algy. 'This'll teach 'em to meddle with opal — dead men's opal at that.'

'She's sinking,' observed Biggles imperturbably as the *dhow* took: on a heavy list and members of the crew began jumping on, or swimming to, the reef. 'So the opal ends up in Davy Jones's locker,' he concluded, as the *dhow*, now tilted, began to slide down into the ocean.

'Best place for it,' Algy said. 'This seems to be a good time to get airborne.' Biggles got up. 'Let's go. These Arabs will have to take care of themselves. We can report what's happened when we get home. A vessel of some sort can be sent out to take any survivors off the island.'

In five minutes the Gadfly was on the water. Another five and it was in the air, circling over what might well have been named the Island of Misfortune. Satisfied that all was well, Biggles turned away and set the machine on a course for Calcutta.

Five hours later it was on the airport, taxiing to the parking bay.

CHAPTER 17

BONNEY HAS THE LAST WORD

AFTER they had checked in, Biggles' first move was to contact the office in London to let them know all was well and he was on his way home. The next was to find accommodation for the night. There was no difficulty about this, and after the best meal they had had for days they enjoyed a comfortable night's rest.

Early the following morning Biggles was at the local office of Indian Airways inquiring for Collingwood's pilot friend, Mackay, and may have been lucky to catch him just going on duty. As quickly and as briefly as possible he told him what had happened on Bonney Island, what Collingwood had been doing there and how he had died. Mackay agreed that this relieved him of any responsibility of making another trip to the island.

In view of what happened later, when he had had time to think it over, he must have changed his mind. It came to Biggles' notice like this. He and Algy had been home for nearly two months when they happened to drop into the Royal Aero Club for lunch. Afterwards, in the coffee room Biggles noticed a Flight Captain of Indian Airways. He didn't know him, but on the spur of the moment he decided to take the opportunity of sending his compliments to Mackay.

Having introduced himself and Algy, he said: 'Do you happen to know one of your chaps named Mackay?'

The Indian officer flashed a smile and answered: 'Yes, I knew him well.'

'Why the past tense?' asked Biggles. 'Has he retired?' 'I think you could put it like that.'

'Did something go wrong?' , Apparently. Do you happen to have

heard of a place caned Bonney Island?'

'Yes, I've heard of it,' answered Biggles cautiously. 'In the Indian Ocean.'

'That's right. Well, all I know is, some weeks ago , Mackay asked for time off to go there to fetch something — on his own plane, of course. When he didn't come back one of our big machines flew out to see what had become of him. There was no one on the island. Not a soul. Nor was there any sign of an aircraft. What happened we don't know, but it's a safe bet that Mackay went down in the sea.' The Indian looked at his watch. 'Excuse me, but I must be going or I shall be late.' He hurried off.

Algy looked at Biggles. 'So Mackay must have had engine trouble and ended up in the drink.'

'I suppose so.' Biggles put out a restraining hand. 'I know what you're thinking. Don't say it. Mackay may have gone looking for opal, but nothing will make me believe that that caused his engine to fail. The Arab who was grabbed by a shark would have died the same way had he been carrying a bag of nuts. It's all a matter of coincidence. Let's get back to the office.'

The End